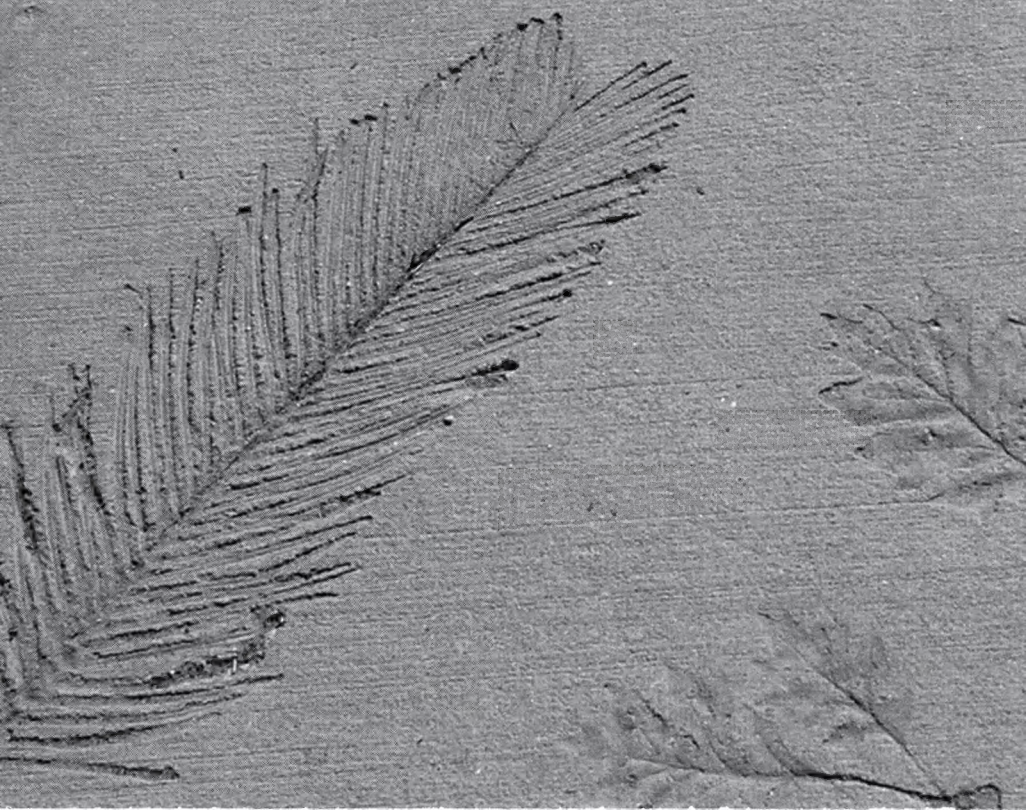


# Humana Festa, A Novel

Regina Rheda





***Humana Festa, A Novel***

**Regina Rheda**

Translated from the Portuguese by Charles A. Perrone

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The animals of the world exist for their own reasons.  
They were not made for humans any more than  
black people were made for whites or women for  
men.

Alice Walker

Never again may blood of bird or beast  
Stain with its venomous stream a human feast  
To the pure skies in accusation steaming.

Percy Bysshe Shelley



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## Do

“Fuckin’ animal!”

Megan glared at Diogo with razors in her eyes. He had just committed the same old error. He had called a bad driver an animal. Megan checked a box in her notepad:

“One more point for me.”

“Sorry, Megan, animal’s not an insult, I know. But when you’re in a hurry to cuss someone out, you don’t always get the vocabulary right and you end up using some reactionary word.”

Megan softened the censure in her eyes, nearly closing them as she smiled like a girlfriend should. She understood. Most people take a while to learn new things. And Diogo’s task was two-fold: he had to speak English and to avoid speciesist language at the same time.

The bad driver passed on the right, in a cloud of dust and strident tires.

“Watch out, you stupid hog!” shouted the Brazilian.

Another quick cut from her green eyes. Another point for Megan. Diogo said he was sorry, It’s the last time, honey, I swear.

Megan accepted his apology with a lateral hug. It’s OK, just for now, for my boyfriend to refer disrespectfully to an innocent pig. The most important thing — for now — is that he no longer eats pork.

“Holy cow!” Diogo exclaimed, and this time Megan’s look, like that of a saintly cow, was fine with it all. “Did you see that guy lying on the sidewalk?”

“What guy?”

Diogo came to a stop. They walked back a few yards. He pointed to the sidewalk:

“That guy there.”

Megan didn’t see any man lying there. But she did see a little bird.

“Poor thing,” she whispered. “Do you think she’s hurt?”

“She’s breathing. Must be learning to fly. Let’s go.”

“But what if she’s hurt?”

That’s what it was like to go out with Megan, having to get all worried about animals in trouble. They were already sharing a house with seven cats and three dogs that she had rescued.

“It’s illegal to keep wild birds, Megan. Leave ’em alone. We’re in a hurry.”

“I don’t want to keep her at home. I was thinking I could take her to the veterinarian and then to a rehabilitation center for wild animals if necessary.”

“You’re thinking of doing that now? What about the surgery?”

Megan shrank beneath the shade of her straw hat. Her agenda had its own rhythm, different from ordinary ones that schedule appointments beforehand. In her agenda there was a decree to give immediate aid to animals in danger found along her way, in unpredictable situations. And at that moment, Megan’s agenda coincided with that of a certain Dr. Stanley: she was the animal who needed urgent care. No, the bird probably wasn’t injured. In most cases, free baby birds on the ground should be left alone. They end up flying.

Diogo looked around. He didn’t see any cats, dogs or kids. It was a neighborhood with large houses on big spreads, lazy lawns stretching out, long-legged pine trees, oaks covered with Spanish moss. The little bird was safe.

“She’s safe for now,” said Megan. “But we could get her farther away from the road. Or put her back in the nest.”

She tried to pick up the little ball of feathers, but she scared it underneath a bush. All the nests hid from invaders like Diogo’s eyes, which couldn’t locate a single one in the tangle of branches of the older trees, in the hollow trunk abandoned by a woodpecker, in the roots of an oak tree overturned by the latest hurricane.

A car was coming. The couple linked their legs to form a protective wall for the bird. The threat of the car passed.

"After the surgery we'll come back here," Megan decided.

They arrived at the manor house of what used to be a farm, identified on the roadside sign as Alligator Plantation. They crossed what was left of a Southern woodland domesticated by herbicides, pesticides, and undocumented Mexican workers, where proud turkeys and cranes strutted about in a constant state of alert because of the frenzy in the parking area. A new boat named Leah rested on the grass next to two imported sports cars. Up against the Roman columns of the veranda of the big house, two motorcycles, wide as refrigerators and loud with colors, shouted: A winner works here.

The decoration of the big house displayed the taste and the joie-de-vivre of the owner. In the foyer leading to the waiting room, balanced on its hind legs on a little table and dressed as a Rastafarian, the stuffed cadaver of a raccoon greeted the patients with a mock human smile that the taxidermist had tried to chisel in its mouth, torn and deformed by the actions of the hunter. Above the horrendous smile, the rigidity of the glass eyes made the motives of both the assassin and the decorator even more macabre. Next to the reception counter, an embalmed polar bear brandished teeth and claws in attack position to alarm the infirm. On the mantel, the severed head of a moose branched out. And in the middle of the room, beneath the intricate crystal chandelier, stuffed cranes and turkeys kept watch over the carcass of an African crocodile, foreshadowing the future of the fowl strolling with fear on the property grounds.

"I thought it was illegal to keep wild animals in your house," Diogo joked with Megan. But he was the only one who was amused.

A photo gallery showed a smiling Dr. Stanley standing next to his victims. He full of vigor, haughty, firearms held erect; the victims listless, laid out on the ground, covered in blood. In their faces, the horror of death, the humiliation of the taxidermy.

"Let's get out of here," said Megan. "I don't want to give money to this criminal."

"And cancel the surgery? He's the only specialist in Florida, Megan. Maybe the best in the South."

Dr. Stanley was head of a commission of dermatologists for the prevention of skin cancer, and he appeared in a local TV commercial saying that in Florida the problem had reached epidemic proportions, that one fifth of Americans and one third of Caucasians would get the disease, that never before had one seen so many young people with skin cancer as today, use sunscreen and wear a hat, stay out of the sunlight between ten and four, further information at so-and-so website or consult your dermatologist. He had also removed a basal cell cancer the size of a dime from the governor's nose, assuring journalists that the chances for a complete recovery were a hundred, ninety-eight, ninety-six percent, more or less. Among the photos of the surgeon with the fallen animals, there figured one of a smiling Dr. Stanley with the governor restored to health.

Megan observed the patients. No one was less than sixty years old. The one closest to her had dark blotches on his face. Sweet and gooey like grandmothers, the blotches turned toward her:

"And how old are you, dear?"

"I'm twenty-three," Megan responded.

"Too young," said the dental stains. "But Dr. Stanley will take good care of you. He's very competent, very nice, sweetheart."

The stains on his teeth were brown. The ones on his face had varied coloration and irregular shape: melanoma, the deadliest of the three, Megan thought to herself.

A year ago, while she was washing her face, Megan had noticed a little mole on her right eyelid. The mole grew slowly. It didn't really hurt. But if it continued to grow it might affect her vision or make her eye look a little strange. Cosmetic surgery, no big deal, she told Dr. Kim's nurse on the phone, health insurance doesn't even cover it.



Dr. Kim showed up at the exam room with standard delay plus the haste to squeeze in one more fifteen-minute appointment, and just past the threshold of the door, having set her trained eye on Megan's little mole, she said unceremoniously, Oh, it looks like we have a basal cell cancer here.

"What? A cancer? That can't be," Megan groaned.

"It doesn't spread through the body, it's not fatal," Dr. Kim quickly came back. "I mean, it can spread and be fatal. But only very rarely. The chance for a complete recovery is a hundred percent. Or ninety-eight, ninety-six percent. More or less. If you have to have a cancer, the basal cell cancer is the best one for you to have."

Megan didn't have to have a cancer. She was not like "that other" category of humans, the one that has cancer. Beneath her little mole, her eye dripped.

"Let's do the biopsy. It might not be anything at all," said Dr. Kim, who needed to calm the patient down and had just about ten minutes to remove the visible part of the little tumor. And she handed her a brochure explaining the three types of skin cancer.

The truculent, predatory hands, now light and good like angels, were taking care of Megan's eyelid. Dr. Stanley was doing Mohs micrographic surgery. He was taking out the rest of the tumor in stages, examining each slice of the removed tissue under the microscope.

"This way I preserve as much healthy skin as possible and avoid disfigurement," he explained, bent over the right eye of the patient, who opened her left eye at him.

Opening an eye was good to keep thoughts in check. In the dark they would take off and run into paradoxes and fears. In the light they could breathe, gain punctuation and logic. Basal cell cancer is less serious than squamous cell cancer comma which is less serious than melanoma semi-colon if you have the first kind you're more likely to have the other two period. Megan's eye tried to catch some happy thoughts on the ceiling. Basal cell cancer doesn't generally kill, but it disfigures, and it tends to reoccur and, if it's not treated right away, it can destroy nearby nerves, cartilage, and bone period. On her forehead,

Megan felt the hot air that Dr. Stanley exhaled through his nose. That hot air took forever to get to her forehead, and when it did it was as if Dr. Stanley were not close by. Impossible to cross the void that forms between a frightened being and the rest of the universe. Excruciating pain and mortal fear belong only to those who feel them. Megan could share with Sybil or Diogo the pain of cancer or the fear of death, but only on a conceptual level. Each one of the billions of beings who suffer at the same time and die at the same time suffers and dies alone, everyday in war, in slaughterhouses, in jail cells, in cages. Her eye moved from the ceiling to the surgeon's face. Good-looking face. Thank goodness. What if it were gross? Having to look at some gross-looking guy at such a critical time would be more pathetic. Dr. Stanley was forty-something with the body of an athlete and hair. His blue eyes were fixed on Megan's eyelid, and she imagined that they could venture out to other parts of her body, given the right opportunity. His hands were soft like a puff of breath — and criminal. They cured but they also killed. Dr. Stanley was contradictory. Is there anyone who isn't? In a culture totally built on the exploitation of vulnerable beings, there seems to be a lack of ethical consistency even in the most correct humans. Dr. Stanley smiled and winked at her, and Megan's eye escaped to the wall. Her thoughts marched in formation to the ceiling. No one is pure. She, for example, advocated the abolition of the use of animals in scientific research, but she couldn't escape from the same mistaken medicine that sacrificed millions of animals in laboratories. What to do? Commit suicide? Things don't change overnight, and as long as a whole lot of people haven't learned that animals are not means to human ends, an activist worth her salt has to stick with her journey, even going lame, her good foot on the straight and narrow path, the other stuck in a crooked one. Her eye dragged back to the surgeon's face and tried it out for a little while longer. Age lightly etched the skin around his slightly annoying mouth, an annoyance like cherries that are just too sweet, almost like lipstick. At what point did those etchings cease to mark Dr. Stanley's cures and begin to mark his crimes? All human beings have their contradictions. Megan, for example, who fought for the prohibition of hunting, was now getting excited by the proximity of a good-looking hunter's face,

forgetting her boyfriend who was waiting for her in the other room and who had offered to pay for her surgery. Megan pushed her eye back against the wall with the force of remorse. Maybe Dr. Stanley wasn't contradictory, but consistent in his cruelty, violating sentient organisms with his rifle and his scalpel. Dr. Stanley, sadist in the hunt and in Mohs surgery, would purposely leave on Megan's eyelid a tad of cancer that would spread through her organism and kill her. There would be no proof of the crime, no one could do anything for her, a prisoner of war in a cold and isolated laboratory full of suffocating fear and chemical stench, where pity is not permitted, no request for help escapes, and animals only leave dead.

"Is everything OK, Megan?" asked Dr. Stanley, concerned with the tears rolling down his patient's face.

"I'm OK, Dr. Stanley. You don't have humans stuffed too, do you?"

On the way out of the clinic, Diogo gave support to a never-before-seen Megan, a depressed one. He helped her to adjust the brim of her straw hat over the bandage of the mummy-eye. He avoided her free eye, a green grape moistened with red and fixed on his face. He decided that in deference to his girlfriend's stress, he would demonstrate perfect manners, he would shout no insults at bad drivers nor would he employ names of animals to express negative thoughts.

"Now we can see if the little bird that fell has already taken off," he proposed.

The green grape lit up, the redness receded. Nothing like helping an animal to make Megan happy. Diogo felt a little jealous. Sometimes he thought that Megan liked beasts more than him. Not beasts, she would correct him. The word beast has a derogatory connotation and tends to exclude. Nonhuman animals: that's a more appropriate term, a linguistic tool to use in the current stage of the struggle, until some better sign emerges.

Megan was quite happy to see the effort Diogo was making to spare her further anxiety. He crossed paths with four classic types of barbarians in local traffic with nary a squeak. He followed ever so slowly a meek old man in his wavering

Oldsmobile as if in a funeral procession. He let pass an impatient college student fueled by testosterone and beer. He surrendered to the unconditional love of a mother parked in the middle of the street in front of her kids' school. Without making a face, he inhaled the cigarette smoke of a redneck in a pickup covered with bumper stickers against abortion and in favor of beef. Megan thanked him for his demonstrations of affection with kisses and sniffs on his neck. His hair on end, Diogo responded to his girlfriend by discreetly stroking her breasts with the back of his hand. In that goodwill exchange between lovers, in that solid proof of cooperation between true friends, Megan saw an opportunity to get something else off her chest — a liberating insight, actually — without the risk of being taken for a fanatical preacher:

“That Dr. Stanley has some nerve, to impose the barbarity of his taxidermied victims on defenseless sick people! It's just like those hosts who think they're making an excellent impression on their guests by offering them murdered animals to eat.”

For Diogo that comparison was hard to swallow, but he did so in silence. He still couldn't help feeling that his girlfriend's comments about the institutionalized exploitation of animals sounded like a personal attack. After all, of the flesh of all the *friends*, as Megan would say, that he liked to eat, so far he had only managed to trade beef and pork for vegetables. One of his three daily meals was composed entirely of plant-based foods, but he couldn't imagine the concrete possibility of having two meals of this type in the short term, let alone three in the median term. He was a closeted vegan and thought it was better not to set a date to come out of the closet. And if on one hand he admired Megan's attitude, on the other he felt relieved that she didn't speak Portuguese to be able to express her convictions in that language. The date of their trip to Brazil was drawing closer. They were going to spend the week of spring break with his family at one of their cattle and hog farms, located inland in the state of São Paulo. The Bezerra Leitão family, famous throughout the region for putting on rodeos and monumental barbecues, were planning to celebrate Diogo's birthday then. The airplane tickets, a gift from Mrs. Marcela, his mother, would be arranged as soon



as Megan agreed to behave diplomatically and accept the invitation.

Diogo applied the brakes to avoid hitting an obese woman who had decided to cross the road far from the crosswalk. You cracker pig, you killer whale, you dairy cow, elephant, hippopotamus, blubber ball, the repertoire of banned abusive language vociferated in his head. He bit his tongue, which was raring to pounce. He was determined not to see Megan score another point on that damned notepad and take another dollar from him.

Megan rewarded his tolerance with another kiss. More comfortable with Diogo's granting of neutral territory, she continued:

"It doesn't ever occur to people like Dr. Stanley that there are others with an aversion to hunting and dishes made with dead animals."

"Well, many people like them, Megan!" a startled Diogo let slip from his lips. He felt his face turn red. "There are many people with cancer who like the display of animals hunted by Dr. Stanley. And there are many dinner guests who like the meat served by the hosts you refer to. The truth is that most people like to eat dead animals, a lot."

"Tastes can change!" Megan shot back, a little loudly. "And the pain of defenseless beings is much more relevant than the mere pleasure of self-indulgent people!"

"Pass me the notepad!" said Diogo, pulling over. "Pass me the notepad, I want to record a point for me! Your preaching is a real bother."

"Don't worry, I'll score your point," she sulked. "Let's go check on that little bird before it's too late."

Diogo got back on the road. He felt a little guilty. Not even cancer could make him stop challenging the noble determination of his beloved to end the suffering and death caused by human arrogance. He wasn't a bad guy. So why did he always quarrel with Megan, such a sweet thing? Why did he waste time defending a world that was already so solidly

established? It would be smarter to support changing things that were wrong.

Megan added up the points in the notepad. Diogo was losing. There was a greater number of comments on his part that made less of animals because of their species, speciesist comments, than there were attempts to preach veganism on her part. Preach? She wondered how long simply expressing her ideas would be considered pamphleteering. How long would the defense of animals be considered more illicit than cruelty to animals? How long would vegans be considered extreme, and humans who exploited and killed animals, sensible? She asked herself once again why she had decided against a flight toward love at the side of River, who was an activist too, and why she had continued her journey on foot, limping between the right way and the mire of Diogo. One answer was always obvious, like a slap in the face: when he was still going with her, River had flirted with Sybil. But there were other answers, those that transpired from analogies, slow slaps like massages lightly sizzling instead of popping. Megan rethought the analogy between a mire and her courtship with Diogo. It was a little unfair. Diogo gave her shelter, like a broad and sturdy stonewall. But would the translucent River, the partner in creative practical applications of revolutionary theory, ever be capable of offering to pay for a surgery? She bet not. And River was ready to go, he precipitated astounding newness and perfection. Diogo, in his primitivism of stone and shadows, in his musty freshness, submitted to Megan's influence to reinvent himself. Megan really wanted that mire that little by little was being dredged and made landfill.

Diogo stroked his girlfriend's knee and tried to attract her eyes to his. Megan's only eye was still stuck on the notepad. Diogo hoped he was really in the hole. Ten, maybe twelve dollars that he would offer to pay with interest, as the best way to say he was sorry and make up with his girlfriend. Megan would be happy. That month she'd be able to donate fifteen dollars to the group that trapped feral cats to sterilize them, helping to prevent overpopulation, and let them go when they had recovered.

"How much do I owe you, honey?" he asked sweetly.

“You owe me twenty dollars.”

Diogo’s hand sprung off her knee and grabbed the steering wheel. His voice shook as they went over a speed bump:

“Twenty? No way! You must have made a mistake.”

Megan’s numbers were never wrong. That American woman was a computer. Could she be stealing?

“Listen here, honey,” Diogo continued, his face heated up half way out of the window in search of fresh air and a bad driver to cuss out. “I think it’d be better for us to add another column next to the points column. A column called memo, where we’ll note carefully the date and the rationale for each point. Write it all down.”

“Why not? Seems fair,” she said, pretending to be distracted by the application of another layer of sunscreen on her face and hands. For pride, to be polite, or for lack of patience, or maybe for a combination of the three, she preferred not to criticize one more time Diogo’s hereditary fear. He was going to inherit one-fourth of the estate of Mr. and Mrs. Bezerra Leitão, when the day came. But the fear of losing wealth — the ancestral fear of rich property owners, made ever stronger from one generation to the next by the process of selective breeding — was something Diogo had received as an advance, in his mother’s womb. He and fear came into the world together, fear his invisible twin. They grew up together and now they were becoming mature, inseparable. Be wary of friends and girlfriends, fear whispered to him, They want to usurp the wealth accumulated by the Bezerra Leitão family. Beware of Megan, she wants to steal a few stupid dollars from you.

Diogo woke up his girlfriend’s knee with light taps. Somewhat clumsily, he looked for vestiges of resentment in her features. He found a smile as wide as a bandage on an eye would permit. He parked, tamely, near the spot where the little bird had fallen. He drew his girlfriend’s chin toward his lips. The kiss was smeared with perfumed sunblock. Diogo grimaced and withdrew his face from Megan:

“Tastes bad, honey. Next time use an edible sunscreen.”

Megan didn't even know if they had already invented an edible protective lotion. She did know that she would never again be able to receive the light of day on her skin without protection. Sunscreen, water, air, food and hats: these were her basic necessities. Until she could find an edible sunscreen, she wouldn't be able to kiss Diogo on the mouth, outside during the day. From the glove compartment she retrieved the binoculars she used for birdwatching in the park and swamps. She lifted them to her eyes but bumped the bandage, so she handed them to Diogo.

"I can barely see anything from here," he said, twisted up, the binoculars two protruding eyes. "You go look for the bird, you're better with one eye than me with four."

Megan silently left the precarious observatory. The sunny chill of the Florida winter played in her eye and burnt the grass. Megan lowered the brim of her hat. Under the bush where the bird had hidden earlier, she found only dry grass. She stepped softly on some sycamore leaves fallen on the native carpet of low-lying winter plants. She crossed a wire fence and a Mesozoic fantasy of ferns and palms. She tangled with azaleas and ligustrums. Her eye was drawn to a mushroom. She almost lost her hat to a dry crape myrtle branch. She stepped on some poop, of a big dog, and shattered the silence with a shout of disgust, Yuk! Something startled in her path, shook itself, and scrambled beneath a magnolia. The little bird. The little bird, Diogo!, she wanted to shout. But she couldn't. She had to stay still until the bird calmed down. Better yet, she'd stay there until the bird took flight. Sybil would do the same thing in her place. Sybil and she were so much alike, maybe even in the will to be together. The little bird put her feathers on end and chirped a brief tune. Megan held her breath to hear it better. Diogo would be able to tell what key it was in. Maybe C or D, do or re, just like Sybil's companions Do and Re, who got so excited when they heard wind instruments. The little bird's song could help identify what species she was. What were her habits? Native or exotic? Male or female? Just in case, Megan referred to the bird in the feminine. Was she really not hurt? Megan was worried, she was an animal advocate who knew very little about animals. Wasn't it enough to respect them? She sat down on a log, a fallen pine, picked a twig



off the ground and began to scrape out the dog poop from the grooves of her anatomical walking shoe. Man, did that stink! Her eye went back and forth from the sole of her shoe to the little bird, from the little bird to the soiled sole. She imagined how disgusted Diogo would be when he saw her come back to the car: a one-eyed ragdoll of a woman smelling of shit, breeding cancer, her skin eternally goopy, her mouth unkissable in the light of day. I deserve more than that, he would conclude. Megan covered the dirty twig with leaves and fixed her gaze on the little bird. The bird would scare off her fear of abandonment by flapping her wings.

Diogo had missed his morning classes to take his girlfriend to the clinic. He was beginning to feel pangs of hunger, and if Megan didn't come back soon he'd have to choose between lunch and his first afternoon class. He looked for her one last time with the binoculars and put them back in the glove compartment. He saw the notepad. He decided to check the score she had been keeping. The result was twenty-five. He counted twice more. Twenty-five on the nose. Diogo owed her five dollars more than she had charged.

Birds are born to fly, Megan had been taught when she was a girl. Now she was musing that birds aren't born to fly but to try to learn to fly. She toyed with composing these and other aphorisms with teetering logic until the bird jumped and fell, tottering. Megan's heart almost leapt. On the ground the little bird was palpitating. How many times had she fallen since leaving the nest? How many times had she jumped between the sidewalk and the field of ferns? Birds are born to try to free themselves from branches and from the ground. The little bird jumped one last time, fell again, then managed to take off and navigate the ways of the wind.

Diogo had just gotten out of the car to go look for Megan when she emerged from the modest jungle of ferns. She hastily hopped over the wire fence and skipped toward him. She held her hat to her head with one hand and rubbed one foot on the carpet of plants. Beneath the straw brim, she was a lamplight.

"I saw the bird fly!" she shouted, panting. "She wasn't hurt. Learning to fly is a tough job!"

A tad envious of having missed the flight of the baby bird, Diogo opened his arms to the joyous thrust of his beloved. Her face reflected the sun in the shiny lotion:

“Too bad you didn’t see it.”

He held her against his chest and exaggerated a laugh, not to leave any doubt about his satisfaction with what had happened. He suggested a commemorative lunch at her favorite Thai restaurant, which was close by. He even tried to kiss her on the mouth, but she turned her face to the side and took the kiss on her ear. Before getting into the car, she took off her soiled shoe and said that she had to make a stop at home to get a clean pair. She held the dirty shoe, sole up, the whole way home.

“The one to blame for that smelly crap on your shoes,” said Diogo after a little while, his voice slightly off-key in a show of good will, “is not the dog, but his guardian, who neglected to pick up the poop and put it in a plastic bag.”

Megan caressed his neck with the tip of her nose, thankful for the fairness of his comment. A few months ago, had he been in a similar situation involving stepping on shit, Diogo would have made an offensive remark about animal advocates since they insisted, as far as he could tell, on a dog’s right to shit exactly where humans are going to walk. Diogo continued:

“Actually, if I had said in Portuguese what I just said in English, I would have used sexist language. That’s because, in my language when I refer to humans and nonhumans whose gender I don’t know, I use words in the masculine case. In Portuguese, to be fair linguistically to the two genders, I would have to say ‘*a culpada ou o culpado*’ for that smelly crap on your shoes is not *a cadela*, the bitch, *ou o cachorro*, or the male dog, but his or her *guardiã ou guardião*, who didn’t pick up the poop and put it in a plastic bag...’ Maybe you should score a few points in the notepad for my macho demonstrations too, honey.”

He chuckled. Megan soon did so too, not really knowing why. Playing around with politically correct things wasn’t so funny in the opinion of this activist. Much less in Portuguese, which was Greek to her. But in her estimation, that observation of Diogo’s represented considerable progress, compared to his

speciesist remarks. Diogo was getting one foot out of the mire and giving it a try, muddy and all, on the clean path.

“Speaking of scoring points,” he purred, overflowing with affection, “thanks for wanting to charge me five dollars less than I owe you.”

“You checked...”

“Three times. You’re so generous.”

“I didn’t want you to get irritated. You’re always fighting with me.”

“Sorry, baby. I’m really not very delicate. Sometimes I wonder if I deserve a cool girl like you. I try to be worthy. And I’ll make more effort.”

One corner of Megan’s mouth smiled at Diogo’s tenderness. The other one stopped halfway, held back by the bandage and by her hurt feelings. She and Diogo had been going together for two years and he still wasn’t completely convinced of her honesty.

Thai restaurants were sprouting up everywhere in the country, they were inexpensive and offered some vegan dishes. Megan found their food delicious. On that occasion, Diogo ordered the same thing she did. The appetizer was steamed whole-wheat flour dumplings stuffed with cilantro and chives. The main dish, curry tofu and vegetables in coconut milk. Dessert was similar to a Brazilian sweet-corn pudding, but made of sweet sticky rice filled with a tiny slice of banana and wrapped in a banana leaf. Diogo left the restaurant satisfied. The sweet fragrance of the rice pudding and the coconut milk spread inside his head, sharpening his ideas. It had been a perfect meal. Were not the four food groups that nutritionists assure us are necessary and sufficient for good human health all there? Cereals, vegetables, legumes — represented on this occasion by the soy in the tofu — and even fruits, even if only a slim slice of banana. Megan seemed to be so contented. Diogo’s conscience rocked him between felicity and ecstasy. Not to mar the delicate experience, he refrained from using a toothpick while he was driving.

“Pay attention, honey,” he said solemnly. “I promise something to the both of us. I’m going to stop consuming everything that comes from animals. From this point on, I’m vegan, just like you.”

Megan loved hearing that. If he kept his promise, just during meals Diogo would spare from servitude and death the equivalent of at least a hundred and fifty animals the size of a chicken every year. And there would be a little bit more with his decision not to buy any more wool or silk clothes, leather shoes, soaps with animal ingredients or tested on animals, tickets to zoos or films with trained nonhumans, and so many other iniquities. Getting medicine with no ingredients tested on animals would be tough. Even more difficult, though, would be for Diogo even to need medicine once on his new diet. His initiative called for another commemoration. If the couple lived in San Francisco, Megan would opt for a banquet at the vegan restaurant Millennium, chosen as one of the best in the United States by a gastronomical arts magazine in France. But, as the pair lived in the remote Weekeeewawkeeville, Florida, she herself would prepare the dinner, following recipes in a book authored by the head chef of the renowned California establishment.

Diogo started feeling hungry an hour and a half after lunching at the Thai place. A meal without meat is an incomplete meal, creaked the old habit in his stomach. He didn’t manage to pay much attention in his class on Conservation of Forest Resources, and even less in the seminar Gender, Rural-Urban Migration and Land-Use Change in Acre. His uneasiness increased during the lecture Amazon Agri-silviculture and Pisciculture: Land- and Water-Use Systems, Healthier and More Sustainable, or Not?, given by a guest lecturer from Peru in the School of Forestry. While the Peruvian environmentalist emphasized the pollution that could come with the intensive farming of fishes like *tambaqui*, *pacu* and *matrinxã*, which investors and the Brazilian government were planning to implant in the Amazon, Diogo dreamt, full of remorse, about the diverse ways those animals could be prepared as meals, be it by a river-bank Indian, a cosmopolitan chef, or even by Megan, if Megan didn’t believe that fish have the right not to be used as human resources. And if Diogo felt weak, almost dizzy, with the

nightmare of hunger, he felt even worse with the carnivorous dreams that were trying to sabotage his recently affirmed veganism. Cereals, vegetables, fruits and legumes, he repeated to himself, anxious to eliminate dead fish from his imaginary dish of pleasures, eager to find in the environmentalist's lecture inspiration to fancy gastronomical delights without a nervous system or a brain. The market potential of *Theobroma grandiflorum*, or *cupuaçu*, a very tasty fruit, the Peruvian was saying, is substantial, and Diogo salivated, managing for a few moments to immerse himself in the redemption of guilt-free vegetable dreams. The fruit is produced in Acre, Rondônia, Pará and Amazonas. In the rain forest, the *cupuaçu* tree is twenty meters tall; on a farm, grown rationally, it reaches eight. Twenty in the forest, eight on the farm, Acre, Rondônia, Diogo made an effort to retain, but his brain let the information get away, distracted by the growls and complaints of his stomach. Deaf to these appeals, the speaker continued his exposition with the loquacity of those without hunger. A Japanese company registered *cupuaçu* as a food brand and patented the manufacturing process of chocolate made with the fruit; some suspect that the company stole the patent of that chocolate from the Brazilian environmental agency. ~~These~~ sons of bitches, Diogo thought, wasn't it enough for them to have the world's best food, sushi and sashimi? They were probably already developing in the Amazon a globalized riverbank gastronomy, a fusion cuisine combining Japanese culinary arts and the local. Ah, the enormous economic potential of sashimi of *cará*, *jamuqui* and *curimatã*, Diogo fantasized, without noticing that he was getting up from his chair. In a jiffy, he was out of the room, attracted by the smell of food wafting from the closest restaurant. The potential for juices, sorbets and preserves of *camu-camu*, the Peruvian speaker went on, farther and farther away. The potential for *pupunha* hearts of palm. The *açaí*, and the Brazil nut.

On the wall of the restaurant, a fat and sweaty clock was nodding off five o'clock. The establishment was full of students and other customers who, for a wide variety of reasons, are willing to trade good health for fast, cheap and rudimentary service. Diogo sat down in the no-smoking section, where the smoke released by those who indulged arrived thinned out. The

kitchen emitted a thick steam, escorted by a noise fest of motors and clanking, to impregnate his skin, clothing and hair with the odor of over-used cooking oil. He investigated the sticky menu looking for vegan options and found only two. He decided to get both: an order of French fries and no-mayo cole slaw. When the waitress came over, he heard himself order:

“A cold beer and fried chicken.”

The waitress took his menu and went off. Diogo looked at his empty hands. He could raise one of them to beckon her back over; he would cancel the chicken and order the French fries and cole slaw. But his hands continued as they were. The waitress brought the bottle of beer and a glass, and Diogo's hands put themselves to work right away. Before his mouth could articulate a request to change his order, they capped it with the glass. Affected by the alcohol, his stomach stopped crying and allowed him to hear Megan, who was emerging from a forbidden corner of his memory to do some of her damned consciousness-raising preaching. Fried chicken is the bodies of creatures capable of feeling, socializing and learning, treated like objects. The merchants of their bodies mutilate their beaks without anesthesia and raise them in overpopulated, overheated, dark and excrement-filthy barns with blinding and suffocating emanations. They bombard them with antibiotics and double their weight with hormones. Many can't even stand up. A lot have heart attacks. But lucky is the chicken that dies in the barn and avoids the horror of being transported in overloaded trucks, in extreme temperatures, to be hung by the leg over a conveyor belt toward the impassive blades of the slaughterhouse.

Diogo decided to cancel the fried chicken and he called the waitress. From a distance, she signaled to him to wait a bit and went into the kitchen. Seconds later, she came out with the plate of chopped and crunchy creatures that he had chosen to savor.

He got ready to ask for the check and leave without eating. But the steaming golden fried pieces on the plate before him did not resemble the fowl that hangs by its legs in the slaughterhouse and struggles, terrified, against death. The chicken on his plate had arrived dead at the restaurant and it



wasn't his fault. Diogo was incapable of killing a fly. He loved animals. He'd taken in seven cats and three dogs at home, he treated them like royalty and he'd helped to give them names in homage to the great talents of humanity listed on the Internet as vegetarians. He even had a live-in girlfriend who was an animal rights activist, and he almost missed class just to wait for her to see a little bird take off from the ground. The chicken in front of him had been dead for days. It would be a waste not to eat it.

He sank his teeth into the first piece and began to chew. He felt the burnt cooking oil of the frying pan and the pure cholesterol of the bird's skin inundate his mouth and lubricate his throat to aid the passing of the masticated pulp. He reflected on his gastronomical experience. The food might be saturated with oppression, bad cholesterol, hormones, antibiotics and carcinogenic substances, but indeed it was delicious. He chewed one more piece and then another.

He hadn't stopped being vegan, he assured himself. This was an exception, a special occasion in which a serving of fried chicken had put itself in front of him, for some special reason, if not by pure chance. He'd never again be faced with a similar situation. One by one, the pieces of bird disappeared from the oil-drenched plate, where a limp slice of lemon was drowning. With repeated gulps of beer, Diogo washed down the flesh stuck in his esophagus and with a toothpick he removed strands left in his teeth. He would not let Megan make him feel like a criminal. He would not allow her to abuse him psychologically. He wasn't a pervert, a psychopath who brutalizes innocent beings for his own selfish pleasure. He knew what he was doing. That was his last meal made of beings capable of feeling pain and with an interest in staying alive. And, things being that way, he'd have seconds. One for the road. His hand shot up to call the waitress over.

As he was waiting for his order, he called Megan:

"Hey babe, how are you doing?"

"I'm a little sleepy because of the painkiller."

"Then go rest, honey. No need to cook. Let's postpone our dinner until you're all better. The Thai lunch was so nutritious that I'm not really hungry."



## Re

With their eyes closed, they were twelve shadows. With their eyes open, they were twelve dark figures leaking green light. During the day, those twelve pairs of eyes moved about the house in all rhythms and directions, conducted like Japanese puppets by the black-robed bodies. At night, they sparkled going after lures that the humans would strew around the room just to see pairs of them in motion, in firefly flights, free of the bodies that melted into the darkness. In the morning, just before feeding time, the black bodies painted musical notes in the parallel lines of the kitchen, tails hanging from the surfaces as straight as in a score. Do and Re almost always sat on the floor and on the first step. Mi stayed on the second step and Fa, in the chair. So, La and Ti liked to vary their spots and sometimes usurped others' places. Treble Clef, Quaver and Bass Clef preferred on top of the cupboard and the freezer, not to be bothered. And the two still nameless ones would stay on the washer and dryer. As soon as food was served, their voices would vibrate like violins, drum rolls and whistles and they would leap toward their bowls, like those little bouncing balls on the screen in old movies that would teach viewers to sing a song.

Throughout the rest of the house, rooms without pictures on the wall or carpets on the floor, there were twelve convex shaded lamps always on, fastened to tables and aimed at twelve patchwork cushions that Sybil, Megan's mother, had had made with colorful old scraps. Next to each lamp, a plastic vase with a harmless plant trying to add a taste of forest to that home for felines and primates.

"There's no room here for knick-knacks and fragile art objects," informed Megan's mother. "Black cats under lamps next to plants are prettier compositions than a cemetery of sculptures broken by awkward leaps and games of hide-and-seek."

Sybil only had older furniture, some inherited and some from antique fairs. She only purchased second-hand clothing, and

only when really necessary. Megan had told Diogo that her mother liked to live with the minimum so she could dedicate maximum time to the pleasures and duties that were truly worthwhile, without wasting natural resources or adding to the pollution of the planet. A good home, in her opinion, was a combination of practicality, comfort, respect for the environment and conditions for the free expression of all residents. It shouldn't have objects from the outside, with purely aesthetic function, but rather forms of art that flowed naturally from within, from and with the interaction of those four factors. Thus, her furniture and bed linen were pieces of process art (or art in constant transformation, as opposed to the finished artistic product) made by cat-scratchings in supports as diverse as tables, wardrobes, sofas, dressers, tablecloths and bedspreads. Those pieces comprised a set of organic abstractions in which one could observe how the backdrop of a centennial hand-woven lace tablecloth and diverse pulled-out threads enter into dialogue, the tension between the various textures obtained from liberating perforations and aleatory scorings in a cherry-wood dresser from two centuries ago, and the impetus of the gesture that, motivated by the need to stretch the muscles, to demonstrate contentment, to mark territory or dispose of old claws, engraves a whole spectrum of aesthetic possibilities on the surface of cardboard cat scratchers sprinkled with catnip or a 1900 mahogany Edwardian table. If asked to situate those works in an artistic trend, a critic would perhaps choose abstract expressionism, not without running the risk of being guided by anthropocentric thought.

Bob, Sybil's new partner, found it painful to see her allow a gang of cats to scratch up her precious furniture and to tear up her rare pieces of cloth, all for her notion that the high value of the supports raised even higher the quality of the artists who work with said supports and of the works carried out on them. But he didn't get involved in that issue. He preferred to remain absorbed in his own artistic specialty, the culinary arts. He expressed his talent at the sink, the oven and the stove. The kitchen was his studio, gallery and space of intervention. For a gastronomist married to a feminist, it was a pretty good deal.

"I don't set foot in the kitchen," said Sybil. "I'm very busy."

“She doesn’t know how to cook and she doesn’t want to pay any help,” Bob added.

Sybil clarified:

“I don’t want to take advantage of people without papers willing to work for a pittance. And I can’t afford to offer what the job really should pay.”

“You see, Diogo?” Megan teased. “You could learn from Bob how to prepare vegan dishes. I’m not going to spend the rest of my life in the kitchen either.” She turned toward Bob in an over-excited manner that Diogo found almost hysterical: “I won’t set foot in your kitchen either, Bob!”

Bob let loose a comment in the midst of guffaws:

“Now you’re talking!”

Diogo pushed a muffled ha-ha toward the radiant wake of Bob’s laughter. The two nameless cats without ID tags ambled toward his legs, and he took advantage to dissipate his discomfort by touching their soft ears with the tips of his fingers. It had been two years since he had discovered a reality named veganism, which did not permit any exploitation of animals. During this time, with Megan’s guidance, he had begun to reject any and everything to use on the body, and any and everything to have fun with, that involved the use of animals. At this point, he had even managed to stick to a diet in accordance with that ethical position — most of the time, so to speak. But cook? For Christ’s sake. To cook was asking a lot. He was starting to think that, despite the fascinating company of the black cats, he’d be stressed out the whole weekend. He wouldn’t be able to relax, knowing that the models of virtue Sybil, Megan and Bob likely considered him to be obsolete. On the other hand, he imagined that when he took Megan to Bezerra Leitão’s farm, she would be the one to have a rough time, feeling out of place with the language and the culture of aggression toward animals. The two of them would be even. Diogo thought it better to look at their having to go see the relatives as a ritual of initiation into the complications of family life, and he took a deep breath to reduce the stress. The two little cats were massaging his legs with their heads and bodies, and his eardrums with their purring mantra.

Sybil had inherited from her parents the enormous shingle-style Victorian house, which had rather high property taxes increasingly difficult to afford. Sometimes she felt like selling it and moving with Bob to a house of a size more suitable for a human couple. But then she would forget about it, satisfied to be able to provide some comfort to the confined cats that meandered about her vast floors.

Contrary to what Diogo suspected, the twelve black cats didn't live there just to serve as interior decoration, to symbolize feminine wisdom, to be the recipients of the affection of a romantic woman or to attend to the whims of an eccentric lady. As Megan's mother put it, they were "refugees from the companion-slaves industry." She adopted as many as she could from animal shelters. She preferred black cats over others because black cats are among the favorite targets of sadistic people.

"Many evil-doers get their victims right there at the shelters," she explained. "I get there before them, I'm preventing cruelty."

Shelters in the US had stopped granting requests to adopt black cats close to Halloween, due to cases of mistreatment of the animals during the holiday. But all the shelters in Cambridge, in the Boston area, made an exception for Megan's mother, year-round preferred candidate for guardian.

Diogo thought the world of the cats' names, Do, Re, Mi, Bass Clef, Treble Clef, Quaver, all that. What a great idea, he said to himself. How interesting Sybil was. Megan just adored that woman. He was jealous. Sometimes he had the impression that he came in third place in his girlfriend's ranking of favorites, after her mom and all nonhuman animals.

Bob fired up a joint and offered it to the other representatives of his own species. Only Diogo took a hit; marijuana made Sybil and Megan paranoid. Diogo put on a disc of serenades and *chorinho* music by Altamiro Carrilho, K-Ximbinho and Patápío Silva, full of flute solos, which he had brought as a gift for the kitties. He wanted to see if Do and Re actually demonstrated that they took joy in hearing wind instruments play high notes, as Megan had told him. He didn't

want to show any less consideration for the humans, so he gave them a disc by the Banda de Pifanos de Caruaru. In the living room perfumed by the tenuous smoke, he played DJ, alternating flutes and fifes, as well as maestro, conducting the live yelps and purrs that responded to the discs. Do and Re performed a choreography of quick dashes, belly-up contortionism and chin-rubbing on the furniture. Two by two, some green headlights opened and closed in the direction of the humans, signaling the pleasure of sharing the party.

At the end of the session, Bob tuned in at low volume a radio station that broadcasted jazz and soul night and day. He was a large fellow, pale complexion, pink cheeks, growing belly. His red-pepper nose blossomed between two founts of calm and attentive light.

“So, Diogo, exactly what is it that you study in Florida?” he asked, sunken into the armchair and underneath Bass Clef, who kneaded the dough of his abdomen as if making bread.

“I’m in the School of Forestry,” Diogo responded. “I’ll be an expert in forestation.”

Big field, today, in the near future, destruction of the biosphere, future generations, Bob replied something like that, which Diogo couldn’t pay much attention to, distracted as he was by the two nameless kitties who were darting about the room. They left streaks of coal in the air and rolled around together, spinning like a top on his shoes.

Bob continued, Make the preservation of nature profitable, conserve what’s left of the tropical rain forests, urgent need to save rivers and lakes. One of the nameless kittens climbed up Diogo’s shin, grabbed onto his knee and sank her sharp teeth into him. She was moving her tail back and forth, and the other kitty swatted at it.

“I’d like to christen these two cats,” Diogo said all of a sudden. “Their names will be Fusa and Semifusa.”

Bob stopped talking and had a good laugh, his wide hand on Bass Clef’s shiny velvet. He laughed just because, or maybe because he was addicted to laughing. Diogo was a little self-conscious, he thought about apologizing for having interrupted.

But Bob gave him the impression that he didn't care, that he knew that if he stopped talking, somewhere in the world somebody else would continue his speech. It's all the same difference, Bob seemed to suggest. He was already in charge of the kitchen.

Diogo asked Megan and Sybil what they thought of the names in Portuguese, Fusa and Semifusa. Sybil was lying on her back on the sofa; between her legs was Megan on her back; and So was on her side on top of Megan. The three of them, a single hybrid organism. A new species on Diogo's planet. A monster — and a monster with rights! The hybrid organism paid no attention to what the Brazilian had said. It didn't have to pay attention to anybody. It was self-sufficient. It had four hands similar to human hands, which would pass their fingers through hair on different parts of its bizarre body, plus four black members, like those of a cat, attached to the belly that had once belonged to Megan. It emitted whistles, squeaks, chortles. It was hiding secrets, threats, unbearable truths. Diogo's eyes sought the complicity of Bob's face, but he found it sunken even deeper in the armchair, behind Bass Clef.

"I like the names Fusa and Semifusa," Bob smiled. "What do they mean?"

"Thirty-second note and sixty-fourth note."

"I'm sure Megan and Sybil will approve," said Bob, as if mother and daughter were not right there.

And they were not. They had been replaced by the hybrid organism. Using playing with Fusa and Semifusa as an excuse, Diogo ran around the couch to get the monster's attention. Fusa and Semifusa didn't understand the game and they stopped in their tracks, scared. So got ready to jump off Megan's tummy, digging her claws into her skin.

"Ouch!" an irritated Megan exclaimed. "Stop that, Diogo. You're being a baby."

And she made fun of him to her mother. The pair's giggles — the hisses of the monster — undulated in the smoke, interlaced with the harmonies spilling from the radio, and penetrated Diogo's ears. He took them in with the physical



pleasure and the psychological uneasiness that the smoked herb tended to provoke in him. He accepted the discomfort, wrapped himself in it. He hated monsters who laughed and gossiped. They make a boy feel stupid in the classroom. They humiliate him in front of the girls and the lady teacher. Giggling girls are always making fun of men.

Diogo needed to combat the monster, cut open its belly, and remove his serious and sweet Megan from inside.

"Megan, honey, just imagine," he shouted, anxiously. "You won't believe it. I forgot to bring the camera!"

She didn't hear him. She was paying attention to some little secrets that her mom was whispering to her. He tried again:

"Did you remember to bring the camera, did you, Megan?"

She rolled her eyes and exhaled her impatience from her inflated cheeks:

"Diogo, honey. I am have-ing a con-ver-sa-tion with my mo-ther! It has been a looOOong time since we have seen each other. We have less than two days together. I missed her sooOO much. Understand?"

"I missed you too Megan dear," said the other head of the monster.

Diogo stiffly:

"Megan, you didn't answer my question."

Megan cranky:

"What question, for heaven's sake? What was the question that I didn't answer, my child?"

Diogo thought it over. What exactly was the question? Even he couldn't recall. It's hard to rescue princesses from monsters when you're stoned. He found Bob's red nose sniffing the scene between the two amused eyes.

"Bob, where's the bathroom?" he asked, crestfallen. "I need to wash my face to wake up."

Bob chortled. He pointed the way to the downstairs bathroom with a gentle gesture, not to bother Bass Clef on his

stomach. Fa jumped on his thighs and he put his knees together. She sat on them and began to wash her face with her hands wet with her own saliva.

Diogo went down the hall, where Ti was batting a paper wad. He saw small portable water fountains in the rooms. Quaver was having a drink from one of them. Diogo stopped. The black shadow aimed green flashlights at his face and dried its whiskers with its pink petal tongue. Curiosity satisfied and danger dismissed, it went back to drinking water.

In the bathroom, near the shower stall, flowed another fountain, ignored by Fusa, who at that moment was drinking from the toilet, water likely richer in vitamins and mineral salts. With Diogo's arrival, Fusa took off down the corridor toward the stairs. The festive gallop drummed on the wood floor and multiplied on the upper floor, in a game of you-can't-catch-me. Shrieks, hissing, a plant vase falling. And guilty, frightened silence.

On the other side from the shower stall there was a porcelain bathtub from early last century, with cast iron feline feet. The bottom was covered with cat litter, which the humans of the house did their best to keep clean. The upper wall of the bathroom had a wide glass window through which occasional sunlight was supposed to shine to combine with the light of a large lamp in order to make a sort of greenhouse. Under that light stretched out a longish planter box with grass. It was wheatgrass, another very good idea of Sybil's. Weekeewawkeeville had many parks and public gardens where Megan and Diogo could pick, year round, different kinds of grass, so effective in aiding feline digestion and hairball regurgitation. In the cold climes of Massachusetts, however, the ingenious Sybil grew her own indoor pasture for cats.

Diogo closed the door and sat on the toilet, more because he wanted to let pass the sensation of being excluded by Megan together with her mother than because he was feeling that necessity, common to almost all the creatures in the animal kingdom, which customarily leads civilized humans to the latrines of this world. His mind turned to the Megan he knew before they came to visit Sybil. He wanted to discover where she

had been hiding, in the sweet, sensible and idealist girlfriend, her other side, the back talking, gossipy, bratty, momma's girl. He remembered the photograph that she kept in her synthetic-leather wallet: on a beach under the blazing Florida sun, a bikini-clad Sybil was nursing a naked and tanned infant, baby Megan exposed to her first cancer-causing rays.

"Mom let me breastfeed till I was three," his girlfriend had told him in the saccharin tone she took whenever she missed Sybil. "Even when I was already eating normal food..."

"...from the four groups of plants necessary for good health," Diogo completed, trying to disguise his jealousy with a provocation that he found humorous.

"Even when I was already eating normal food," resumed Megan, unaffected, "I preferred the breast. Mom couldn't wean me off until she rubbed vinegar on her nipples. I suckled, made a face and shouted: Went bad!"

Megan had also told Diogo about a video where Sybil appeared naked, painted like a leopard, inside a cage in front of Macy's in New York, in the middle of the winter, to protest the fur business.

"I was ten years old when I recorded that video," had sounded the voice of a sultry nostalgia. "The next month, in the science fair at school, I did a display about the suffering and death of the animals used in research, clothing, food, and entertainment. I was planning to include a video interview with the philosopher Tom Regan. But, at the last minute, I decided to replace the interview with the video of mom's protest. My stand filled up with boys. The teacher's assistants took a while to realize what was going on. When they came over to unplug my VCR, the kids booed them."

Diogo had been totally able to grasp the reasons for the booing. Both the defense of animals and the appreciation of a female nude were causes for which all citizens worth their salt, young or old, should struggle. At least that's what he thought, for a while. Until Megan showed him photos from a feminist conference in Washington D.C., in which Sybil participated years after the incident at the science fair.

"At that congress mom gave a talk urging feminists to become vegans and advocates for animal rights. She explained that disrespect for females of the human species has the same source as the exploitation of the females of other species."

"As a good feminist, your mother blamed everything that's wrong on the patriarchy," the Brazilian got one in.

"As the informed, ethical and committed person that she is, mom criticized the arrogance of the human male," Megan corrected. "She reminded all that the majority of animals abused and killed by the animal exploitation industry are female: milk cows, laying hens, breeding sows. And she said that the feminist movement will never reach its main goals as long as it doesn't recognize that nonhuman females also have rights."

"I must admit that the idea makes perfect sense."

"But that's not all. The next day, mom attended a lecture that went even deeper into the issue of feminism."

"Even deeper? You must be kidding."

"The speaker pointed out parallels between the use of animal bodies in the fur and food industries and the use of women's bodies in advertising campaigns. The chicken's thigh on a plate, a woman's thighs on the poster. The sow's body in the oven, a woman's body in the sun. The tigress in the cage, a woman in a feline pose."

"A tit jumps out of the leather jacket," the Brazilian said dramatically. "A pelvis emerges from the fox fur coat. Behind an elegant tray with caviar, the open legs of a sophisticated young woman, filled with desire..."

"That sort of thing. I mean, the bodies of animals and women's bodies are both treated like commodities. Mom arrived at the conclusion that the use of female nudity in campaigns to gain support for the animal cause is incoherent and reactionary. She never again participated in demonstrations with no clothes on."

Diogo thought that Sybil's decision also had to do with the changes that the passing of time had perpetrated on her figure. For if the public display of the naked body of a twenty-year old model with a smooth waist, flat stomach and perky breasts

constituted a disservice to the struggle for rights of the excluded, the not-so-graceful silhouette of a forty-something mother would bring even more catastrophic results for the movement. But he kept this thought to himself. Anything but to pull some macho bull in front of his girlfriend.

Megan rarely spoke of her father. She had only said that he was an obscure jazz pianist. Why should she say more? With a mother like that, who needed a father? Diogo's fear was that Megan might end up discovering that she didn't need a boyfriend either.

"This is Karen, who lived with mom and me for seven years," Megan had replied when Diogo asked who that husky guy with his arm around Sybil was in a photo at a ski resort. "She was so sweet, so polite, that Karen. She sure worked hard. With her own hands she built a veranda and an addition in our back yard. She was the one who knocked a hole in the upper wall of the downstairs bathroom and installed the window and the light fixture to make the wheatgrass greenhouse."

Pretty cool, that Karen. And what happened to her?

"She developed an allergy to cats. She started taking some allergy medicine, but then she got allergic to the medicine. The poor thing's symptoms were so strong that she had to get out of the house for good."

"Your mother preferred to keep the cats rather than staying with her girlfriend, I mean, wife, I mean, husband??" Diogo had asked, fearing the response.

"I don't know about that," Megan replied, expressionless, given that she considered animals as worthy of love and respect as humans. "What I do know is that Karen left because it was easier to find a good home for her alone than good homes for all the cats. Then mom started dating Bob. Karen's heart was broken. She took off for Mississippi. She works there in a sanctuary for elephants rescued from banned circuses and zoos."

"You must have missed Karen."

"I did always like her. But I really only miss my mommy," and Diogo wilted with jealousy. "I'm a privileged person. I was raised by the most admirable mother in the world.

She taught me everything that's important. She's the example I try to follow."

But while Megan missed Sybil a lot, it wasn't exactly vice versa, in Diogo's opinion. Sybil barely called Megan at all and rarely replied to her e-mails. Her feelings were bad soil that Megan tried to fertilize with exaggerated affection. In the estimation of the forestry student, in the land where maternal love did not thrive, the love of the daughter flourished at the cost of non-sustainable artifices. But one day the excessive fertilizer would end up harming the soil and spoiling the roots of that imbalanced relationship. It was only a matter of time. How long, however? Long time, short time, Diogo didn't have the patience to wait. He concluded that, on the one hand, as a farmer and expert in forestation, he should by all means avoid the wearing out of mother earth; on the other hand, as a young man in love and future husband, he should try to discover a way to precipitate the wearing thin of mother Sybil's image. The work of the young man in love would not be easy. Megan resisted his most convincing arguments. Like the fact that Sybil had only shown up after Megan had a bout with cancer.

"She's very busy," was Megan's firm reply. "She cannot, she does not need to, and she should not be my nanny. She did the best thing you can do for a daughter: she taught me to be strong in order to fight for the weak."

A delicate creaking and Ti came into the bathroom through the cat door installed in the bottom part of the door for humans. Shy, she sat on the floor within a contour formed by her tail. Diogo realized he had been in the bathroom for a while and decided to go back to the living room. Before that, to take advantage of his location on the toilet, he went ahead and defecated. Not that he really had to go so bad. Just that bowel movements had become so much easier and pleasurable ever since he started eating brown rice every day, that producing smooth and comparatively inodorous excrement was a true joy for him. He checked the bottom of the bowl for his deposit of compact material and reflected. Shit: the child's primordial gift to his parents, according to Freud. And for Lacan, the exteriorization of our most intimate inner self, Diogo thought he

had read somewhere. Our crap gives us shame because our intimacy gives us shame, the Frenchman supposedly proclaimed. Worrying about what to do with our turds is exclusive to our species, for we have a peculiar inner being. Diogo caught sight of a clump of litter in the old bathtub. Had Lacan said anything about the inner being of cats? After all they cover their feces. Elucubrations on the theme sprawled in the student's weed-intoxicated imagination as he made use of the organic and recyclable toilet tissue kept on the towel rack out of the reach of the felines. From the floor, in a bibelot pose, Ti stared at him with her florescent fixtures. Inhibited by being observed with such curiosity as he was wiping himself, he stood up straight, flushed, washed his hands, and left the bathroom without having washed his face.

When he got back to the living room, the hybrid organism was no longer there. Sybil and Megan, seated on the same couch but separated, were trying out the words *Fusa* and *Semifusa* on their tongues and in their ears, seemingly approving. Thirty-second note and sixty-fourth note, a helpful Bob explained. Not knowing where to sit, Diogo stood standing longer than he thought appropriate. His eyes scanned the space between Megan and her mother, his brain calculating if his body would fit there, etiquette pondering whether it would be proper to slip in there. He needed to prevent the monster from materializing again in that house. Ti returned from the bathroom, began to heave and coughed up a wet hairball with wheatgrass onto the floor. From the cushions made sunny by the lamps, La and Treble Clef observed her with eyes of blades of grass. Sybil got up to clean up the barf. In a fraction of a second, Diogo took Sybil's place and made his girlfriend's lap his pillow, weighing her down against the seat with his head.

"*Fusa* and *Semifusa* are great names, honey," Megan finally told him, the temperature of her body a little higher than normal. She's got a fever, Diogo thought, she was infected by the hybrid organism, who had marked its territory on her clothes with the scent of the mother.

Snow was burying the short afternoon. Through the window, Do and Mi followed the trail of the snowflakes with the

antennas of their whiskers. Diogo closed his eyes pretending he was asleep. Or maybe he was dreaming that he was pretending to be asleep. It was all the same. Sometimes it's not necessary to distinguish hallucinations from reality. At that very moment, for example, the only thing that mattered was to prevent his girlfriend from getting tied to her mother's apron strings again.

As soon as Diogo started snoring, Megan quietly got up, slipped a pillow under his head and went upstairs with Sybil to the office.

At her daughter's request, Sybil closed the door. She meowed to So and Quaver, who were sharing the chair in front of the computer. She rolled out a mat on the floor and lay down on it, her legs up, her heels against the wall.

"This position is very good to stretch the back muscles and to prevent varicose veins," she said.

Megan imitated her. So and Quaver installed themselves on their busts like two sphinxes. Mother and daughter kept on gabbing side by side until they felt their legs going to sleep. Then they changed position carefully not to disturb the cats.

They compared Megan's lion mane, solid gold, with Sybil's silver-streaked, golden horse mane. On the mother's feet some veins stood out, on the daughter's the soles were getting thick from wearing walking shoes so often. The young lady's period came every twenty-eight days, the older woman's was irregular. Did Megan still bite her fingernails? Was she still addicted to peanut butter? Sybil had noticed a few biggish hairs on her own chin. She'd never have plastic surgery. She'd never have hormone replacement. She'd never dye her hair. Megan had become more charming with her right eyelid sagging a little because of the scar. Was she using sunscreen as instructed? Don't forget the semiannual consultations with the dermatologist. Nothing would come of that cancer.

Megan made sure the door was closed all the way and said ever so softly:

"Mom, if you were me, would you go to Diogo's family's farm in Brazil, or not?"



Yes, Sybil would. Of course it's painful, for an abolitionist, to visit the so-called animal farms, which in reality are prisons for mistreated sentient beings used as commodities. But perhaps, having had direct contact with the captives, Megan would return from Brazil even more motivated to defend them. Maybe she needed to hear the screams of the kid who feels on her delicate skin the terrible pain of the branding iron. To see up close the despair of a mother watching them steal her vulnerable child. To witness the continuous suffering of the baby immobilized alone, anemic and diarrheic, later quartered and sold at high prices as veal. Megan needed to look into the sweet and pure eyes of the cow forced into successive pregnancies by the slave-driver who rapes her with artificial insemination, who violates her constantly full and inflamed udder to steal her milk, and who kidnaps all her defenseless offspring in the vicious cycle of violence that is a dairy farm.

Megan felt her heart pound, in her David-revolt against the Goliath-injustices of this world. She wouldn't have the courage to look at the real cows and calves on the farm. The very concept caused her indignation enough. With her eyes of boiling water she turned toward Sybil:

"Sometimes I feel like grabbing a gun and going out there like a guerilla fighter, mom."

Sybil gave her a hug. Don't talk like that, Megan. What we want, she reminded her, is not violence, but revolution. A vegan worth her salt has to end patriarchal violence, not perpetuate it! To be vegan and educate other humans to be so as well, to explain to them that the beings of other animal species experience pain and pleasure, have interests, intrinsic value and the basic right not to be treated as our property. Now that's what it means to fight for the abolition of animal exploitation! That's what it means to end the war of humans against nonhumans! Yes, Megan should go to meet Diogo's relatives in Brazil and their prisoners. And she should, even if it were an enormous sacrifice, control her anger (totally justifiable) and show good manners. She should observe etiquette rigorously and never, in any circumstance, speak about veganism during meals with omnivorous people.

"That'll be easy, mom. I don't speak Portuguese."

Oh. Sybil had neglected that detail. Did Megan speak any foreign language?"

"French, mom, like you. We practiced together, remember?"

No, she didn't remember, she had to keep so many things in that little head of hers that kept getting weaker... But she hadn't forgotten French, she needed it, she used it a lot at the international meetings she participated in as a member of an organization to combat domestic violence against animals, children and women.

So and Quaver scratched the door to try to open it and see if things on the other side had changed any after the door had been closed. Megan let them out. Sybil resumed the conversation and her stretching:

"I don't want you to think less of Diogo's relatives because they're speciesist, dear. Do they cause suffering to millions of nonhuman individuals? Yes, they do. Do they disrespect the right of those individuals not to be treated as things for people to use? Yes, they do. But they only do so because society wants to eat meat and drink milk. They do that to meet the demand of a public that has yet to be exposed to the ideas we are familiar with."

"But they could have chosen another way to make money. Like River's parents and grandparents, who worked in journalism, ecology, those things."

"I know. But Diogo's family must have a good side. We all know speciesist people who are generous to their friends, patient with their children, and loving to the animals that they call 'pets'. We know omnivores with a sense of humor, artistic talent, and a sense of justice. And we both know some moronic vegans, don't we?"

"Not me, mom. I only know cool vegans. But yes, I've heard that there are some misanthropic, conceited, not very nice ones."

"Really? I've never met one of those. But I did meet one who farted a lot."

“Well, thank God I never came across one who farted a lot. But I have seen a jerk.”

“Not me, never,” Sybil said. “What I’ve seen are vegan activists who spend so much time working on behalf of animals that they don’t keep up with their own children.”

Megan looked at her with surprise, her right eyelid sagging, dripping with devotion:

“Well, mom, an activist like that, I’ve never met her.”

Sybil lay down again on the mat, put her hands on her hips, pushed her legs up and balanced her body on her shoulders. She produced one final piece of advice, though her breathing was made difficult by the exercise:

“Don’t turn your nose up at Diogo’s relatives just because you’re vegan and they’re not, dear. Diogo’s a wonderful young man.”

Wonderful. Either Sybil had decided to find all of her daughter’s boyfriends wonderful, or Megan really was lucky with men. Sybil had found River to be wonderful too, and vice versa. A brief flirtation with her mom — he had ended up confessing to Megan — a fleeting passion. She didn’t reciprocate, let that be perfectly clear. Later on, there was a pathetic scene in which Megan’s eyes spouted tears and her nose ran toward a Sybil who was determined to assure her that she hadn’t even noticed the boy’s enthusiasm, that to torture herself with jealousy was to disrespect herself.

Megan felt bad that she still recalled the episode with more hurt than shame. She feared that her mother’s body, so close to hers, would capture her fragility, her pain, and, what was worse, the whining of a spoiled girl that didn’t go well with the idea that the two of them had about her. She tried to think about something else. She needed to get her inner tumult under control, to use reason as a painkiller, tonic and pacifier.

They could hear scratching at the door. Megan opened it. So and Quaver came back into the office and began to inspect it to see if, while they were away, the closed door had hidden any change there from them. The conference of the four mammals went forward through the night, doors open.

“How do you like being a waitress at a vegan restaurant, dear?”

“I’m a cashier, mom. At the natural foods store, Mother Earth.”

“Of course, sorry I got mixed up. Does your salary cover the cost of your philosophy books?”

“Not philosophy, mom. Comparative literature. Yes, I’ve been able to buy some books with my salary.”

“How nice. When your thesis comparing Voltaire and Rousseau is ready, I want to be the first to read it.”

“My thesis will compare two approaches to being vegetarian in English-language literature...”

Sybil interrupted her daughter, eager to correct herself:

“I know, silly. Do you think I forgot? It’s that thesis that you’re dedicating to this heartless mother of yours. You compare Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to... hold on, what’s that other book again?”

“You almost got it right, mom. I compare the approach of Percy Bysshe Shelley in his poetry to that of J. M. Coetzee’s in his prose.”

Diogo woke up on the couch, on his side, with his arms around Fusa, and Thelonus Monk on the radio. He was the only human in the room. Semifusa was sleeping in the nest formed between his torso and his bent legs. Bass Clef was coupled to the curve of his waist. The wall clock looked at him with its pupil contracted in a vertical line. Six in the morning, and Megan had had the gall to leave her own boyfriend there, snoring, shoes on and all. Not very nice. She had never treated him like that. He rubbed his face on Fusa’s coat, soft like water and smelling like lettuce. With the utmost care not to upset the three architects of human bodies that had turned Diogo’s into a safe and comfortable dormitory, he dislodged them and went to the guest room. He saw no one. Megan must be blabbing with her mother, he concluded. The two of them were taking advantage of his weariness, caused by the stress and the marijuana, to giggle and

shriek like bad little girls. What witches! His mouth was dry. He went to the kitchen to get a drink of water. At least he'd be free of Sybil there.

But what a filthy mess, the kitchen. Sybil had no idea that, by refusing to set foot in Bob's culinary-arts studio, she was missing a great chance to broaden her perception and consciousness through artistic contemplation. Resorting to shock tactics, the genius had erected in the sink a disturbing installation of days-old dirty dishes worthy of figuring alongside the work of certain talents of contemporary art who use sacrificed animals in formaldehyde, or decomposed and full of larvae, in order to challenge the ethical and aesthetic values of the public, as well as to attract a little attention in an ever-more competitive market. In the same line of these artists, Bob, with his pile of smelly pots and pans and plates, challenged the narrow and rigid view, still predominant in societies that make use of kitchens, that the only acceptable sink is a clean sink. But unlike said talents, he did not commit the crime, for the time being tolerated in the name of free artistic expression, of using imprisoned and murdered animals to debatable human benefit. Or did he? It wasn't possible. Bob was a vegan chef. At least he had allowed Megan and Diogo to believe that he was. He was a vegan chef, or the model citizen Sybil would not have fallen for him.

Diogo approached the sink and subjected the work to a minute examination, looking for blood, skin or scales. In the lines, strips and plaques of dried and oily sauces in varying tonalities, which interacted in alternating scrapings and stirrings, produced by the back and forth of forks and spoons at the bottom of plates and pans, he detected no animal remains of any kind. Maybe he'd find some on the surfaces of the old stove. He approached it with a bit of difficulty, constrained by the soles of his shoes in contact with the thick carpet of dirty grease that the chef's art had woven on the floor. To his horror — or for the broadening of his perceptual consciousness —, the stove was covered with the same material as the floor. He chose not to open the cabinet where the garbage can was. It wasn't necessary. If one of the characteristics of art is to alert one's spirit to the complexities of human life, Diogo's spirit was already alert enough.

But in some sections of that inciting art gallery, Bob's work showed itself to be conventional. In the vast pots and pans section there were sauce pans, cauldrons, and pans so clean you could eat out of them; there were objects of various sizes, with and without Teflon, made of aluminum, stainless steel, copper, regular and enameled cast iron, clay, stone or tin. The same cleanliness was to be found in the pantry, and its abundant content of bottles, jars, boxes, and packages: olive oil from Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Italy (authentic and falsified, plain and seasoned) and from Tunisia, Turkey and Australia; palm oils from the Americas, Africa and Asia; the prosaic oils made from soy, corn, rice, peanuts, cotton, sunflower seeds, canola, sesame, and coconut (both raw and toasted), and also the uncommon oils made from ginger, curry, wheat germ, rice, mustard, dill, avocado, flax seed, saffron, cardamom, as well as from apricot, grape, and cumin seeds; normal and aromatic salt, rock and sea salt, kosher, from California, Hawaii, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Korea, Chile, Iceland, and the whole Mediterranean region, in grains varying in color, size, transparency and shininess; local alternatives for salt No Salt, Lite Salt, Salt Substitute and Cardia, besides the Argentinian Genser. A vast collection of spices crowded against another even larger one of vinegars made from fruits, herbs and flower petals. Cooking knives and carving knives of various shapes, sizes and materials, German, Japanese, Swiss, French and Canadian, inserted themselves into wooden blocks, stuck to magnetic bars, or nested in a chef's kit along with some scissors. What vegetables available in the market could offer so much resistance to being cut that they could only be vanquished by such an imposing arsenal?, reflected Diogo, intimidated by that abundance of sharpened tips and blades. In Weekeewawkeeville, Megan had managed to prepare an entire gourmet vegan dinner, with four dishes, duly balanced, using a single big knife and a small one. Bob's gastronomic studio was the utmost expression of overdoing it and of superfluous supply. It was a tumor of dissipation lodged in Sybil's minimalist house. It was also the lynchpin of a marriage of opposites, was Diogo's conclusion. It was what linked that crazy duo. The tumor was the pact. By refusing to set foot in the kitchen, Sybil was doing more than rejecting the traditional role of housewife: she was feeding

the tumor. If the tumor weakened too much, the marriage would wilt. Diogo opened another cupboard to look for a clean glass. He found a few meat hammers hanging on hooks. He examined them one by one, looking for residues that would normally get incrustated in this type of utensil. From one of them he was able to extract, with a fingernail, a little bit of something waxy. He smelled the substance. It was decomposing meat. The Brazilian got excited, took a deep breath. He had to wake up his girlfriend, tear her from her mother, show her that hammer! He had to prove to her that Sybil, that example of a woman to be followed, was an accomplice, whether she knew it or not, of an artist as criminal as those who practiced the esthetics of violence against animals, promoted by galleries of contemporary art! Diogo would drag Megan to the kitchen and would show her that the collection of knives wasn't there just to slice yucca and watermelons, but also to break through muscles and bones. After smelling the waxy residue stuck to the hammer, she would never again feel justified in scoring points in that damned notepad with the same conviction. She would never again have the courage to make him go hungry after meals. She would never again feel she had the right to submit him to the brainwash of tofu. That little dictator. She wanted him to become her cook? Very well, then. He opened the refrigerator to look for and enumerate all the animal products that, if he wanted, he could prepare when living with her, reigning in a kitchen where she would never set her virtuous and feminist foot! But he didn't find any animal products. He saw an open package of wieners. He read the label: soy product. He inspected the freezer. It was full of opaque packages with no indication of content. He turned some over with his fingers hurting from the cold in search of any tear to look through.

Over the kitchen speakers, Thelonius Monk gave way to the Dave Brubeck Quartet. The soft pealing of a piano was joined by violins and whistles. A man asked a question:

“Can I help you, Diogo?”

Startled, the Brazilian jumped up. Absorbed in scraping with his fingernails the dim paper of one of the wrapped frozen items, he hadn't noticed Bob arriving with the black cats coiled

around his legs and tuned into their pointy melodies. One by one, the black notes got settled in the staff lines of the kitchen.

“Water,” Diogo replied, slamming the freezer door. “I’m looking for a little water. Cold.”

The chef’s face lit up. He opened a short and square refrigerator full of bottles:

“Take your pick.”

Diogo stepped slowly over to the sophisticated well. He felt his heart beat faster, his stress get worse. On the shore of the reservoir, he stopped and looked down. There was sparkling water and still water. Mineral, from the source and purified. Enriched with potassium, calcium and magnesium. From Macedonia, Slovakia, Spain, Australia and Sweden. From the French Alps, Belgium and Iceland. From Israel. From Germany, rich in fluoride. From Romania, rich in carbon and iron. Rainwater from the Fiji Islands, rich in silica. Water from an Egyptian oasis. The plastic and glass bottles fell in waterfalls, cascades and rapids. They covered rivers and lakes. They clogged dams. They suffocated fish, they killed algae. Diogo’s wide-open eyes hovered over the ghastly cistern.

“If you don’t like any of these, I have others in the cellar,” said the concerned host. “I have water with aromas of fruits, of herbs...”

“I just want to quench my thirst!” said Diogo, catching the breath he had lost in the whirlwind of his environmentalist nightmare. He pointed to a mossy and unkempt clay jug, on the corner of the counter, which was awaiting, hand on hip, the arrival of a glass. “I want that water there.”

“Excellent choice!” Bob was quick to fill two fancy glasses. He tried the liquid with the delight and the expertise of a wine taster. “The clay of the receptacle returns to the beverage its original palate and freshness. You can hardly tell it’s tap water.”

The twelve pairs of green light were following all the humans’ movements with boundless patience. There will be shortages, everybody needs it, lucrative investment, Bob spoke of the future of potable water on the planet. Diogo didn’t think it was fair to make the cats wait so long to eat, so he cut him off,



offering to help him serve them. The food bowls were placed in their usual places, and the diners flew from the staff toward them like birds off power lines. Soon they left for their cushions, where they would lounge in lamp light, wash their faces with their licked hands and remove, with the brush in their tongues, the impurities of the kitchen that had got stuck in their feet and coats.

Bob made use of an Italian espresso machine. Ornette Coleman tried out his saxophone in the aroma-of-coffee atmosphere. Diogo started to rub a soapy sponge on the impenetrable crust of grease and dirt that covered the stove.

"Don't worry about cleaning now," a courteous Bob said to him. "I'll need the stove to fix breakfast."

"No trouble, I'm already on the job," insisted the visitor, trying to reach as far as possible with quick and vigorous movements. If he were really good at it, he might also manage to put part of the installation in the dishwasher before the artist exposed more food to the unhealthy environment.

"Do as you like," smiled Bob. "I usually let things get really dirty before cleaning them. But today in honor of your visit I can make an exception."

He laughed out loud. Diogo opened the dishwasher to fill it, but it was already full. He set the dial to rinse-and-hold just to get some of the heavy dirt off. He flooded the surface of the stove with water and biodegradable detergent. He left some of the dishes soaking in the sink. If he did a good job, by the time he left Cambridge he could take down the whole sink installation and maybe suggest to Bob that he clean the floor. He sat down to have a cup of coffee with him, while the soapy water softened the crust on the stovetop.

"Megan's still vegan?" the host asked him.

Was Megan still a vegan? Diogo cackled. Is water still wet? Does a bear shit in the woods? Is the Pope still Catholic? A phrase with the words Megan and vegan was flat out redundant.

"I thought she might have given up on that silliness under your influence," explained Bob.

"On the contrary. She influenced me to go vegan. That's not silly."

"Sorry. I thought Sybil had told me you're omnivorous."

Diogo wavered.

"I was. My veganism is quite recent."

"Didn't know that," Bob said. "Sybil and I no longer talk about veganism. That's part of an agreement we made."

Diogo's neurons snapped out loud. How many pacts sustained that implausible association? He felt an urge to investigate their "agreement." Not to intimidate Bob — a middle-class American and therefore someone more easily embarrassed — he thought he would broach the issue little by little and ask first about the coffee he was drinking. But then he imagined even further stress if faced with a collection of packages of organic and non-organic coffees, ground and whole beans, raw and roasted, from Colombia and Sebang, from Brazil and the rest of the world, and he gave up on the idea.

"What agreement?" he asked straightaway.

Bob aimed his tranquil eyes at the dial of the dishwasher:

"The rinse-and-hold is over. If you like, you can put in some detergent and start the regular cycle."

Diogo followed Bob's suggestion then came back to the table, coffee pot in hands. He poured more coffee in the two cups. He tried another approach to the issue that so interested him:

"Funny you say you have a pact with your wife," his voice slid along so carefully. "I too have one with Megan, which involves scoring points and writing them down on a notepad. Could it be that our pacts are the same?"

Either Bob did not catch on to the Brazilian's insistence, or he was not bothered by it. He sipped some coffee:

"It's a peace agreement. Sybil and I used to fight a lot. I kept trying to become vegan, with no success. Maybe you've had the same trouble during your transition."

Diogo thought about it before saying anything. He hadn't explored the kitchen artist Bob's idiosyncrasies, demeaning himself as a freezer spy and janitor, only to admit that he was a weakling like him. He elaborated a response in silence,

considered possible consequences, and, in serious tones, declared:

“I have overcome a few small difficulties with Megan’s support. But the greatest incentive is my determination to respect animals’ right not to be objects of human domination.”

Bob burst out laughing, his pink cheeks squeezing his lively lime-green eyes:

“I know, I know, I know...”

The phrase *I know* echoed in his complicit gargling. Diogo felt a bit humiliated. No omnivore was in a position to make fun of him. On the contrary, it was he who had what it took to criticize Bob. It was true that, at times, he still ate cheese and fish, when Megan wasn’t looking. But it was also true that he was at an advanced stage in the process of shifting to veganism. In this stage, he allowed himself to believe, it is more effective to criticize others’ inconsistencies than one’s own. He breathed deeply a self-righteousness that did him well.

Bob went on:

“I don’t have the same moral conviction or the same force of will that Megan does. I don’t believe that edible animals have rights. That’s clear for me today, but it didn’t use to be. We had a really good vegan cook, and Sybil insisted on paying her such a high salary that I had to take out a loan. But I ate out more than at home. I kept putting off the regimen until the next meal.”

“Poor guy!” an understanding Diogo smiled. Then he shook his head, feeling superior.

“Sybil criticized me for being overly self-indulgent, for lacking animal and environmental awareness, for neglecting my health, for wasting the loan. I attacked her for being pretentious, moralistic, alienated from the real world. I felt like a wimp and ended up making her feel like a tyrant. The relationship became unbearable and we decided to separate. Do you want more coffee?”

Diogo accepted. He sipped slowly. He silently turned over a doubt. Why hadn’t Sybil chosen a partner she had more political affinity with? He thought better of pursuing the answer. Why did Megan prefer to be with him, and not River the Perfect

Guy? He was scared to find out. Emotions are weird. You see the most unlikely couples in this world. Love's motivations are complicated.

Bob went on:

"The first thing I did was let the cook go. Then I rented an apartment. I don't know what was worse, trying to stay away from animal products or from Sybil and the cats. She was also in a bad way without me, and even worse without the cook. So I came up with an agreement. I'd take care of everything in the kitchen, the two of us would accept my incorrigible omnivorous ways, and we wouldn't discuss any further our diets. In the kitchen at home and at my restaurant, I'd prepare and consume whatever animal products I might like. Everywhere else, we'd do whatever Sybil thought best. I didn't think she'd agree to all that. But to my surprise, she said 'deal'. She convinced me to give the cook severance pay, so I had to take out another loan, and then she handed the kitchen over to me. We never quarreled again."

"How nice! I'm happy for you guys," said an unhappy Diogo, thinking it all hardly nice. Why did Sybil have to be married to anybody at all? Wouldn't it be better to live alone than to grant asylum to Bob's kitchen, buried in filth, superfluous stuff and the blood of innocents? Feminists value independent women. Even Diogo, who had never worked for any feminist movement (on the contrary, he belonged to the elite of a developing country who exploited cows and sows) — even he, Diogo Luís Bezerra Leitão, could see that to assume command of the kitchen, keeping it clean and free of animal products, would be better both for Sybil and for her cause. One does politics in the kitchen too, Diogo summarized to himself. To cook animals is to practice the despotic politics of speciesism. To be a vegan feminist and hand the kitchen over to someone who consumes animals is an oxymoron! Sybil was perpetuating the patriarchy. She was practicing chauvinism disguised as feminism. Her feminism was transvestite chauvinism.

"Look over there, Diogo!" Bob said all of a sudden, pointing at the kitchen floor. The floor drain was overflowing with soapy water. Bob bleated: "That's what happens when you clean too much! Too much hygiene stresses out the plumbing."

We should have been reasonable. Turn off the dishwasher, hurry up!”

That order didn’t sit well with Diogo. But he was too engrossed in his feminist insights to talk back. He buried them in the field of worries to be taken up later on, and stood alert to the immediate issue of the overflowing drain. Turning off the dishwasher was out of the question. He opened a door and discovered a broom. With it he spread the foamy water coming up from the drain and swept the floor with great force.

“Careful!” said Bob from his chair, his feet in the air not to get wet. “I don’t know if that floor can stand all that sweeping. I’ve never used a broom on it.”

The radio gruffed the voice of Louis Armstrong. A little more sweeping and brushing, and Diogo’s concern began to move from the foam emerging from the drain to the insights returning to the top of his mind. Could a phony feminist like Sybil resist the gory delicacies of a culinary expert? With what degree of purity could she live her activist life in a hybrid relationship like the one she had with Bob? Did they take their meals together? If so, it wasn’t possible that she didn’t sneak a shrimp or two from his plate every so often. Or that she didn’t enhance the flavor of her quinoa spaghetti with a few pinches of grated cheese.

“There, at the foot of the fridge,” pointed Bob, perched on his chair. “Get that spot there.”

Diogo followed the order like an automaton. What about those things wrapped with no labels in the freezer? Keeping animal carcasses invisible must be part of the pact, assuming that Sybil might one day need to enter the kitchen and confront her demons.

“You forgot the two steps. Clean the top one first!”

“Why don’t you pay attention to the music?” an irritated Diogo blew up. He was actually liking cleaning up. The tough part was not being able to think in peace.

Bob hooted, his good mood was untouchable. He was attack-resistant. He had the Kitchen. He had the Power.

"Thanks for cleaning up," shined the bell-pepper nose between two skylights. "I'd like to help you, but I only have one broom. Now, hurry up and finish the floor and clean the stove. I need it to fix breakfast."

At the end of the rinse cycle of the dishwasher, the drain stopped vomiting foamy water on the floor. Lacking better material, Diogo dried it with rags and paper towels, and started to clean the stove. Bob disembarked from his lifeguard's chair, got some food items from the refrigerator and placed them on the table. He retrieved a small opaque package from the freezer, thawed it in the microwave and opened it onto a cutting board. Diogo was taming the crust on the stove, which surrendered itself, damp and limp, to the licking of the sponge. He saw that the substance thawed by Bob was bacon.

"And Sybil?" he asked, taking up the thread of a conversation he had let drop a little earlier. "Is she still a true-blue vegan?"

Bob rippled a gargling laugh:

"Yes and no."

"How's that?"

The chef took a few wieners from the opened package labeled as soy product that Diogo had seen in the refrigerator, and raised them between his sausage-like fingers:

"I bet you can't guess which are soy and which are meat."

Diogo's eyes popped out:

"You mix animal products in with the vegan ones?"

"What's the problem? I'm doing Sybil a favor."

Diogo looked at him, confused, his face a squeezed lemon. Bob explained:

"Vegans need vitamin B-12, which you can't get from plants."

"Apparently no consensus has been reached about that yet..."

"I don't want to run any risk!" squealed the cook, cutting and stacking slices of pig fat on the cutting board. "My health

and my wife's health can't wait for the scientists to decide! The truth is that without my initiative to blend secret bits of animal products in Sybil's seitan, rice milk and soy burgers, she might have had some neurological problems!"

"Megan and I take Vitamin B-12 in vegan pills. We don't need to consume animals."

"That's not natural."

"Eating animals raised in prisons, stuffed with drugs, sacrificed in slaughterhouses, seasoned and cooked, that's not natural either," said Diogo, in a growl that almost covered that of Tom Waits belching over the radio.

Bob smiled and nudged the Brazilian's shoulder with a closed fist:

"No need to fight about that, right? I don't want to spoil your weekend. Look, let's make an agreement. Forget your radical stance just one more time and try my breakfast. If Sybil likes it, you will too."

"Sybil is never suspicious of the ingredients?" asked Diogo, the feelings of his stone shoulder hurt by the chef's little game.

"I don't know. We never talk about it."

Diogo finished cleaning the stove. The chef placed the frying pan on one of the burners. Diogo checked its contents. Stretched over the strips of fat rich in cholesterol of an unfortunate pig, there were little red cane-shaped things made of intestine, belly, lips, spleen, vagina and anus: sausages.

"I have a proposal," Diogo said and took the frying pan off the stove. "Today the guest will make breakfast. You guide me, I'll cook." And he whispered: "But everything must be vegan."

He heard the chef's laughter derail from his throat into the kitchen and collide with the high notes of Aretha Franklin.

"I couldn't commit an affront against a guest, right? I accept!" said Bob. And he emptied the contents of the frying pan into a tupperware, which he covered with opaque wrap to put in the freezer.

At noon, the hybrid organism on the mat in the office was awakened by two trays full of food that Bob and Diogo held there for it to smell. The organism stretched and dismembered into So, Quaver, Megan and Sybil. Bob, his partner, and her daughter masticated many compliments for the breakfast prepared by the Brazilian, which simulated an American brunch and was inspired in other gastronomies: scrambled tofu, seasoned with sea salt, chopped chives, cilantro and imitation grated cheese made from rice; soy dogs cooked in fresh tomato sauce with onions and green pepper, and wrapped in Cuban bread; spinach salad with wild strawberries; whole-wheat toast with peanut butter and raspberry jam; orange juice; coffee with rice milk; brown rice pudding with coconut milk; corn muffins; yucca with maple syrup; and avocado sushi with nori seaweed.

So, Quaver, Fusa and Semifusa were interested in the sushi and accepted a few pieces of nori seaweed. Diogo said next to nothing during the meal, his lips pressed together in a smile. He spent the whole time attentive to each reaction to his dishes, of which he was quite proud, as demonstrated, without his even noticing, by two dancing stars in his pupils. Sybil seemed to take the greatest pleasure in the brunch. She said, not to take anything away from the dishes prepared by Bob (who snickered at the comment), that she hadn't had home-cooked food so smooth in taste and light on the stomach in a long time, and she attributed the phenomenon to Diogo's true vocation to be a chef.

"You should explore further your wonderful gift," she recommended, stuffing a muffin in her mouth full of pudding.

Megan hugged him, kissed him, whispered that she loved him, that she was very proud of him. Diogo thanked them for the compliments. He lowered his eyelids, withdrawing his eyes radiant with triumph into his thoughts. He surely deserved to be in charge of a kitchen, as shown by his cleaning and his cooking. But Megan would be even more impressed when he told her that he had prepared all that grub holding it, afraid to go to the bathroom to pee lest Bob, left on his own, contaminate the meal with his patriarchal sabotage. She would have more confidence in her own worth when he revealed to her that the main culprit in Bob's shady dealings was Sybil herself. Sybil and her political



negligence, would be Diogo's accusation. Sybil and her hypocritical feminism. Sybil and her selfish love, maintained by pacts that hide the true face of one's partner.

"Excuse me just a second," said Sybil, exiting the office. "I'll be right back with a present for Diogo. I think this is the right time to give it to him."

The Brazilian put on a sickly yucca-plastered smile. He would gladly take command of a kitchen, but a gift from Sybil? Perhaps he should refuse it delicately. He had just plotted a "benign" betrayal against her, which would denounce her, in a good sense, to her own daughter. Under these circumstances, it might not be ethical to accept the gift.

"Mom really likes you, honey," Megan spoke low. "Yesterday after you made like a conductor for Do and Re to play, she had nothing but praise for you."

Diogo blushed. Feeling funny to be blushing in front of Megan, he blushed even more.

"So all that giggling and whispering by you two on the couch was all compliments?" he ventured.

Megan hesitated. Wonderful, dear.

"Yes it was," she replied, squeezing her eyes closed against jealousy. "Mom said you are sexy and have many other good qualities."

Diogo felt his lips burn. He excused himself and went to wash his face. He ran into Sybil, who was coming out of the bathroom and heading toward her room. She avoided looking straight at him. Diogo cooled the coals of his lips and cheeks with cold water. If he turned down the present from Sybil, he ruminated, he'd be committing a gaffe. Even worse, he'd be leaving the impression that he didn't deserve it. He was not rude; declining gifts and homages just wasn't part of him. Sybil, truth be told, was generous, intelligent and she had good taste in food. Even so, she was still betraying the abolition of animal slavery in her complicity with Bob's foul play. Diogo was plotting to betray a traitor who was protecting another traitor; therefore, Diogo deserved the present.

He returned to the office. He got there at the same time as Sybil. She handed him an envelope. Thank you so much, *muito obrigado*, Diogo melted into his own language to sound more sincere and cordial. He opened the envelope and took out a check. He read the amount as quickly as he calculated the expenses that it covered: Megan's surgery and the plane tickets for this trip. As he embraced Sybil and said, "You really shouldn't have," he estimated that his future mother-in-law had added to the cost of the surgery and tickets some five hundred dollars; that was the gift properly speaking.

"I know it's not very elegant to give money as a gift," apologized Sybil with pure, childlike eyes. "But it's practical."

There stood a woman, Diogo reflected, who did not take advantage of others. Besides being intelligent, generous, profoundly honest, and having excellent taste, Sybil was just what her daughter said she was, an example to be followed — unlike her husband, who really was a scoundrel. Diogo felt bad for having harbored, for a few seconds, a mistaken idea about Sybil, with respect to the culinary situation in that home. She was not her husband's accomplice, but his victim. If Diogo had accused her unjustly, that was due to his incurable macho ways, along with an archaic animosity, culturally acquired, toward the mother-in-law figure. Diogo would talk to her and Megan. Hiding information from people makes them vulnerable, informing them makes them strong. He would do his duty as a responsible citizen and bring mother and daughter into the light about Bob's dishonesty. But when? He didn't want to be the bearer of bad tidings to two marvelous women and spoil their Sunday. In practice, what would Sybil and Megan really gain from his denunciation? And another pragmatic question: would the exploitation of animals be any less? Wasn't the annual amount of butter, wieners, strips of bacon, and chicken broth cubes that Bob camouflaged in the ingredients of Sybil's food rather small to make any difference in the way animal exploiters conducted their business? Diogo slipped the envelope with the check into his pocket. How complicated ethical issues are. Life is not easy for humans.

After the meal, Bob gathered the trays, stacked the plates and silverware on them, and yawned an expectation of Sunday rest. From his open mouth escaped the American male habit of burping, followed by an "Excuse me". He dragged himself to the kitchen carrying the dishes, accompanied by the black choir of four-legged sopranos. Diogo came down the stairs behind the host, who soon returned to the living-room sofa to take a nap underneath La and store the energy needed for afternoon and evening work at the restaurant.

The Brazilian finished all the cleaning in the kitchen. Then he prepared a snack to have with Megan on their way back to Florida. As a precaution, he only used slices of rice cheese and soy turkey straight from unopened packages. The doubt about talking with Sybil and Megan concerning Bob's sabotage didn't allow him to work as he should, and he cut his finger with a knife.

On the way to his room, he stopped in the hall to play with Ti, kicking the paper wad around. Soccer relieved some tension. Turned loose, his ideas wandered and reorganized spontaneously. They ended up as they should. He needed to reduce the burden of his ethical obligations. He didn't have to tell Megan anything. He loved her too much to cause her such a painful disappointment. It would be psychologically incorrect to destroy the inspiring symbology of the feminine that she saw in her mother. It was to Sybil, and to Sybil alone, that he had the moral duty to denounce Bob's shameful betrayal. Afterwards, if Sybil found it best, she could have a talk with her daughter.

As Megan took a shower, he tried to write a message in English.

*Dear Sybil*

*You may find it strange that I am telling you this in writing. I don't have the courage to tell you in person. I have to be brief, since Megan will be back from the bathroom soon*

But the narrator of the text sounded cowardly and immature to him. He crumpled up the message and tossed it in the recycle bin. He tried to write another.

*Dear Sybil*

*Moved by great admiration for you and by the intense pressure of conflicting feelings, I have decided to write you this note. I ask you not to say anything to Bob, he might hate me*

Very corny. He crumpled the new text too and tossed it in the bin. He wrote another and one more. None of them began right. The bin was running over with crumpled notes. Megan came out of the bathroom. He grabbed a towel. She came into the room in her mother's bathrobe. He glanced her way, forehead wrinkled, jaws tense. He left the room.

"I'm going to take a shower," he grumbled.

Megan said playfully:

"You're not going to give me a kiss?"

The bathroom door locked in a loud response.

Megan began to get dressed. Diogo was acting strange. He'd barely talked to her the whole weekend. Why? He seemed to like the cats, the interaction with Bob, the activities in the kitchen, Sybil's compliments. What was the problem, then? She looked at her white body, her susceptible skin, in the mirror. From beneath her eyelid knocked out by disease, she saw her short future. She, Megan, was the problem. Diogo, the heir, probably considered her a bad investment.

Behind her figure in the mirror, Ti dove into the recycle paper bin. The cat pawed at the paper wads, creating in them the consistency of rubber and the agility of fleas, frightening them with her leaps and bounds, and then chasing them to the floor. Megan began to pick them up. She found it odd that there were so many. They weren't there before, she was sure. She flattened one out and read:

*Dear Sybil*

*This weekend was a watershed in my life. I'll never be the same. Let me explain. First, I ask you to say nothing to Bob*

Watershed? A culinary epiphany, that was it. As he was making breakfast, Diogo had had a vegan culinary epiphany. But there was something they couldn't tell Bob. What? She read another message.

*Dear Sybil*

*Megan doesn't know that I'm writing to you. We hide nothing from each other and I feel bad for betraying her trust. But if I'm betraying Megan it's because my love is very strong*

She crumpled the note. What was this business of betrayal and strong love? They couldn't tell Bob. They couldn't tell her. They couldn't tell us what?

*Moved by great admiration for you and by the intense pressure of conflicting feelings*

Megan trembled, she quickly opened another aborted message.

*This is my seventh try to tell you something that maybe should never be said*

She rummaged with Ti through the paper bin.

*Torn between duty and love*

*My admiration for you and my passion*

She re-read part of one of the texts.

*But if I'm betraying Megan it's because my love is very strong*

What hemorrhaging, corrosive pain! The violence of the suffering caused by the fear of loss tore Megan into shreds. Her lungs became too small for the air necessary for her survival. The nightmare... again! First River, now Diogo... Compressed in paper cysts, the passages of the messages were screaming that in the short space of a weekend Diogo had fallen for her mother! Megan's efforts to monopolize Sybil's company by clinging to her like a nursing baby were not successful in discouraging the fantasies of the young seducer... Wonderful, dear.

Megan took Ti in her arms. She heard the consoling percussion of the cat's trachea. She let a tear drip onto her back. Ti mewed, lightly bit the human's hand as if unlocking a cage with her teeth, and sat down on the floor to brush off with her tongue the specs of dirt that Megan's touch had left on her coat. Megan lay face down on the bed and muffled her weeping with a pillow.

Diogo came back in the room, in jeans and shirtless. The shower had washed away the wrinkles of worry from his face. The weight of moral questions had now lessened. Megan's moans were faint.

"What's up, honey, what happened?" he asked sitting next to her.

Ti got settled in his legs. Megan pointed to the crumpled paper and sobbed:

"I know everything. I read your messages."

Diogo shook his head, bewildered:

"Oh, sorry, Megan. I didn't want you to find out about that terrible betrayal."

Megan inhaled the pain running from her nose:

"And that betrayal... was consummated how many times?"

"During every meal."

"You must be kidding!"

"But that's the cold hard truth. It was shameless, fucking dirty tricks and all. And the harmed party didn't even realize!"

"What do you mean?" the poor thing murmured. "What went into those dirty tricks?"

"Ah, a little bit of everything. Weiner. Butter. Even cream."

"You mean at brunch today, too...?"

"No, today was different. I took care of things beforehand, in the kitchen."

Megan's eyes popped out:

"While I was sleeping?"

"Exactly. And your mom was very satisfied with my performance. Did you see the check she gave me?"

"How can you say such a thing to me so coldly?"

"It must be because I invested so much energy in the thing and now I'm exhausted."

She let out another moan. He put the cat on the bed and hugged her.

"Don't worry," he said. "That lack of shame did not increase the use of animals by humans".

She pushed him:

"Your cynicism impresses me, Diogo!"

"It's true, love. The volume of wiener and butter involved in the betrayal is too small to cause any change in the way the animal exploiters run their businesses."

Megan looked at him agape, totally confused. Diogo went on:

"I must confess that I'm relieved that you've discovered everything. Now you can help me go all the way in this case with your mother".

Megan flung herself face down on the mattress again, sobbing:

“Enough, Diogo. Now shut up.”

“Forgive me, love. I understand your pain and deception. To see the mother you so adore betrayed like this by her husband...”

Megan lowered the sound of her sobs. Diogo’s voice sounded clearer:

“To see an example of vegan feminist lifestyle being sabotaged in this way, in the kitchen...”

Megan stopped crying. She turned an avid face toward Diogo:

“Husband? Sabotage in the kitchen? You mean the traitor is Bob? He’s been putting wiener, butter and cream in mom’s food?”

Now it was Diogo’s turn to look with incredulity at her:

“Of course. Isn’t that why you’re crying?”

Megan laughed out loud and covered him with kisses:

“That’s wonderful! Wonderful, wonderful...”

Wonderful. They got it on. It was a quickie, they had to go to the airport soon.

But it was not wonderful. On the return flight to Florida, It’s serious, Diogo, it’s very serious. It’s terrible. Bob’s dishonesty, mom’s passivity, their pact of oppression. That’s really low, honey, I might expect something like that from anybody but mom. This can’t end here. I’ll have a very serious talk with her as soon as possible.

The sweet brown rice ingested at brunch evolved into that inner form of human expression mentioned by Lacan, and Diogo went to the restroom to connect with the ambassador of his most intimate universe. The varying atmospheric pressures of the wind and the clouds toyed with the jet like Ti with the wads of paper, but Diogo didn’t feel the bumps. He had his feet firmly planted on that floor held up in the air; he had his hips set tightly on the toilet seat, to the coprophilic kiss. He examined his feminist



activism in Bob's kitchen and his definitive step from reluctant vegetarian to exemplary vegan. As for purity and ethical consistency, he scored even higher than Sybil herself! He considered himself to be a great source of pride for Megan. He felt just. He felt good. That made him happy and gave him pleasure. Things seemed to be where they should be. Who said that the universe is meaningless? Immune to turbulence — that mischievous kitten that, in aircraft restrooms, swats hands and rear ends of limited ability —, Diogo concluded his personal hygiene with admirable skill and headed towards his seat.

From a distance he saw an attractive young man standing over Megan. On his head, the good-looker was wearing that type of bandana with patterns that Diogo had decided was one of the preferred brands of youth given to alternative culture — a nonviolent option instead of a warrior's helmet, he had fun making the comparison. Wrapped in the bandana, the good-looking head poured smiles like a colorful teapot pours tea. Diogo knew that guy. He walked up.

"Diogo, remember River?" a luminous Megan asked, her eyelids raised.

Diogo did remember River, The Perfect Guy.

"No, I don't remember. Pleasure. Diogo."

"River is returning from Copenhagen. He gave a lecture at a conference, The History of Animal Slavery: Immorality as Raw Material of Human Civilization."

River was happy about the coincidence of the three of them meeting in the plane, and he said so looking only at Megan. It was to her, as well, that he expounded a passage of his essay on the commodification of animals in the production of the material world and the industrialization of their bodies. He offered his place in the first row, closest to the video screen, to the passenger sitting next to Megan and Diogo. She, an elderly lady who was doing contortions to see the film between seatbacks, got up right away, saying that it was her lucky day and that it would be her pleasure to let River complete the journey next to the enchanting couple. River made himself comfortable. Without taking his eyes

off Megan, he invited the pair to share his meal made only of raw vegetables, produced on vegan farms in different countries.

“Vegan farming is based on keeping the earth healthy and only uses natural fertilizers made from plants,” he explained, turning his eyes for a second to Diogo, given the probability of his ignorance of the subject.

Megan also turned toward Diogo:

“Instead of enslaving or killing animals, vegan farmers cooperate with them. They respect their natural environment and interactions with plant cycles.”

Humiliated because he had never heard of vegan agriculture, not even in classes in the School of Forestry, Diogo only smiled with one side of his mouth, lamenting his not being up to speed on the issue. Then he relished his small portion of parsnip, avocado and celery soup. He accepted half of the alfalfa sprout, fruit and herb salad. He ate three quarters of the pumpkin spaghetti with cherry tomato sauce. He had to control himself not to devour solo the parfait of mango with dates and lemon. To be polite, he considered offering River his sandwiches of rice cheese and soy turkey. But he was reluctant. River would ridicule his processed goop, his dead food. He would turn his nose up at the pathetic imitations of food made with animal secretions and corpses. River was the best. He had made Megan’s fallen eye rise up, recuperate its original format, harmonize with the other eye. Then he had spread their glow on her skin and given her the clear-green chlorophyllic aura of a nymph. River was making the world better. It was because of annoying guys like River that things never seemed to be where they should be.

## Mi

Through the crack between the boards of the pen, Mortandela saw Mizz Orchid bringing her food. She was always the first to get her share of leftovers fermented in water, and she was uncomfortable with all the fuss that her companions made as she selected with her meticulous nose the least repugnant pieces to begin her meal. Here, Nuno, Topete, Jatobá, here, Mizz Orchid would go to the back of the pen and empty the bucket in the other putrid trough. Then she would leave quickly to get away from the stench, disturbed by the beauty of the flies twinkling in blue and green.

Not that Mortandela was a pickier eater than the others, mused Mizz Orchid. No one there actually liked the meal service. If they were permitted normal lives for hogs in the wild, they would eat roots and other fresh plants. But confined night and day in the small pen, the only alternative to Mizz Orchid's spoiled soup would be cannibalism, if that were necessary.

It's not that Mizz Orchid liked giving them those things either. The notion that beings with eyes so similar to people's might like to eat that stuff defied common sense. But who was Mizz Orchid to say what was right and what was wrong? She didn't know how to read or write. She didn't own a thing. She had no power in the house, in the pigsty, over herself. She just accepted things and obeyed. Don't throw anything away, feed the pigs everything, she had heard as a girl. She had learned to prepare slop before learning to speak. The traditional recipe taught by grandma said to mix any and all leftovers from the humans' table in the dirty dishwater.

Pigs are filthy animals that like to live in their own waste and eat everything that no one else wants to eat mixed in the dirty water that no one else wants to use. That's what was known and passed on. But in secret, Mizz Orchid speculated she knew different. In her mind, if Mortandela, Jatobá, Nuno and all the others could live free, in the wild, they'd poop and pee away from their nests and food. For her, the notion that animals with

eyes like people's might like to live covered in excrement made no more sense than the notion that human beings might like to eat filthy animals like pigs from a pigsty. But what did Mizz Orchid know? She knew nothing, she didn't even have power over herself. All the men and women on the farm, both workers and bosses, were so fond of dishes made with animals immersed in dung that they even celebrated the very birth of the Baby Jesus with pork roast and fried pork rinds, manioc-flour *farofa* with bits of sausage, and tender ham.

Geez, how Mizz Orchid despised Christmas Eve, with that slaughtering of the critters and the unending shifts in the kitchen. Christ had suffered but once on the cross. In a way, her suffering — and may God forgive her one more crooked idea — was greater than Christ's, because hers was repeated every year. She would tie her hair up with a kerchief soaked in lavender to disguise the smell of blood and slice the meats with disgust, horrified by the screams of the animals being attacked and the laughter of the men with clubs and knives in hand. She would use each and every part of the critters, blood for blood sausage, tripe for all kinds of sausage, tail, hoof, ears and nose for *feijoada*, the bean-and-meat stew. At lunch break, she would serve *feijoada* with rice and fried pork rinds to a pile of men in her small dark kitchen and flee to sit underneath the guava tree. Having no appetite, she would pick some fruit just to put something in her stomach. She would come back to the sink and arrange the animal parts on trays, in basins, and in cauldrons provided by Mrs. Marcela, for Zé Luiz to transport by horse cart to the kitchen of the manor house. There with the other maids, she would give up three more days of her life, seasoning and cooking the many that had died in order to give praise to one alone who had been born. May God forgive her, she truly loved the Baby Jesus in the manger. If she was a rebel, it was because she didn't have a good grasp of things.

Nuno, Celestino, Big Snout, Big Pumpkin and the others: the day of their sacrifice would come, just as all the birthdays, Easter, Christmas, all holy days would come, every blessed year.

Mortandela was still alive because she produced good litters. Each pregnancy of one hundred and fourteen days resulted

in eight piglets that she could spoil and suckle for three weeks. Then a human would remove the piglets by force. She would protest noisily. It hurt her. No one paid any mind. The human would only return ten days later to breed her with a boar.

Zé Luiz liked Mortandela more than the other pigs. She had been raised like a puppy, clean and fresh like a rosebud, following him everywhere. While he got the earth ready to plant corn, she would play at digging. When he weeded the fields, she would eat the grass and weeds. When he selected ears of corn, she would eat the discarded ones. She slept at the foot of his bed, on an old straw mat on the brick floor. When Zé Luiz let her get up on the bed, Mizz Orchid would shout that if that pig got the sheets dirty, he was going to be the one to wash them. Zé Luiz would put his friend back on the mat not to have to do a woman's work.

Mortandela grew up, became big-breasted, and the hired hands began to make fun of Zé Luiz. He decided to lock up his friend in the pigpen with the barrows, the castrated males. Mizz Orchid suffered with the complaints of the confined sow. At night, when her son came back from working in the corrals, she'd ask him to let the creature sleep on the mat.

"Have you done lost your mind, mother?" he tossed down in the kitchen his boots sullied with cow dung. "A pig's place is in the pigpen."

It didn't take long for Mortandela to get adapted to the routine of her prison, slop and manure. It wasn't that that pig had learned to like living in the pigpen, Mizz Orchid believed. More like no one would get her out of there.

"Mother, Mr. Bezerra Leitão is modernizin' the farm," Zé Luiz told her one night, late for supper. "He says he's fixin' to make it more like a factory than like the countryside."

"Is that good or bad?"

Zé Luiz didn't answer the question. He explained that Bezerra Leitão had moved all the pigs from the pigpens to a big closed concrete barn, on the other side of the woods, together with a thousand head that he had bought from an American company, Holy Hill. In another area more or less close to the

pigs, the owner of the farm was also building concrete corrals for cattle, which would now live confined and all cramped together, but with the advantage of being able to see the sky since the corrals had no overhead protection.

Mizz Orchid found it strange:

“It’s gonna be like leavin’ the cattle locked up all the time in a feedlot?”

It was indeed going to be like that, but with one difference. The corrals of the milk cows would have roofs to protect the electric milking machines. Mizz Orchid felt a stinging in her breast:

“And ain’t them machines gonna shock the udders of the poor things?”

Zé Luiz found his mother’s concern amusing. Next to what the cows would have to endure in the slaughterhouse, he joked, a tit shock was just tickling. The owner of the farm was going to erect even more buildings — that was another name for the modern concrete corrals and pig barns: buildings — to increase the production of swine. The pregnant sows lived in tiny crates. They couldn’t even turn around in there, but it was better for them, Zé Luiz guessed, they were content and safe. The guys taking care of the livestock were brought in from the outside, specialists, with a lot of culture regarding the drugs that ought to be mixed into the feed and the slop in order to make the pigs good and fat and almost disease-free.

“All them animals poopin’ and takin’ medicine in the same place?” asked Mizz Orchid. “And where’s all that filth gonna go?”

“Come on, mother, what’re rivers for?”

Mizz Orchid imagined the big concrete barn with thousands of sows immobilized in small crates, buried in their own feces, and breathing the awful smell. It just wasn’t possible for those creatures to be content. It wasn’t possible that they wanted to stay there. It’s just that they couldn’t get out.

“Mizz Orchid!” shouted Vanessa, pulling lightly on the reins of Tom Cruise. “Can you open the door for a minute?”

Mizz Orchid left her spoon in the soup bowl and opened the door to speak with Bezerra Leitão's niece.

"Good evenin', Vanessa. You's just in time. You care for some poor man's soup?"

"Leave the lady alone, mother," an embarrassed Zé Luiz whispered. "She already had dinner."

"Yes I would, I'm famished," Vanessa said. She tied the reins to the branch of a yellow tabebuia tree and entered the house, long-legged in her riding boots.

Zé Luiz cleared his throat, sat up straight in his chair, his shy eyes floating in his soup. Vanessa wolfed hers down standing up, bowl in hand. Mizz Orchid made nothing of it, who was she to judge her guest's manners? It was rather late for a young lady to be out and about alone and the sooner Vanessa ate the sooner she would get back home. Vanessa scraped the bottom of the bowl with her spoon and asked for seconds.

"Some bread, Mizz Orchid."

"Ain't no bread," the older woman said.

Zé Luiz got up, I'll go fetch some bread, mother, There was so much bread earlier today, is it all gone? What'd you do with all that fresh bread?, I'll go to Norato's store. He felt humiliated. Whose idea was it for his mother to invite a rich man's niece to have bean soup with them? And what's more, with no bread. He'd go buy some. But his wallet was empty. He'd have to ask his mother for money in front of Vanessa! No, he'd tell Norato to put it on his tab.

"The store's closed already, Zé Luiz. Dummy, you forget the store closes at six?" Mizz Orchid reminded him. "Vanessa, there's roasted corn on the cob in the pantry behind you."

"Corn on the cob is fine," said Vanessa, the cob already flying from the shelf to her mouth on the wings of her fingers.

Zé Luiz sat down. He was a little dizzy. Looking down, he directed his pupils to a seat next to Vanessa and tasted at will the slim figure vibrant in his peripheral vision. He captured her perfume with his short breath. He heard her voracious respiration compete with the grains of corn and the bean soup to pass

through her perfect mouth. Memories stirred of them playing together as children down by the riverside. He couldn't remember having lived a single second that he didn't adore her.

"And Mortandela, Zé Luiz?" Vanessa suddenly bit. "Does she still sleep with you?"

Zé Luiz's palms were getting sweaty. He groped for a sophisticated response.

"Not no more," a serious Mizz Orchid responded. "That pig sleeps with the barrows in the pigst..."

"Mother, she asked me!" interrupted a blushing Zé Luiz. "You think I could answer?"

The women exchanged glances. Mizz Orchid sighed:

"OK, my son, you go ahead."

Zé Luiz gulped and bit his lips.

"Not no more," he repeated. "That pig sleeps with the barrows in the pigsty. That's where she belongs."

Vanessa licked her fingers. She felt responsible for Mortandela. She had given the pig to Mizz Orchid as a Christmas present. She had chosen her name.

"Don't raise the pig in a sty, Zé Luiz. A pig left loose on her own doesn't make a mess."

"That one's cleaner than lotsa human folk," Mizz Orchid opined.

"Mother, let the lady talk," Zé Luiz got irritated. He wished, on this occasion, that he had left his dung-covered boots outside.

"I've said what I came to say," said Vanessa. "From now on Mortandela will run free and end of story."

She took leave feeling like she had forgotten something. She placed two quick kisses on Mizz Orchid's cheeks and on those of her son. Zé Luiz felt himself melting, being sucked in by her lips. A microscopic movement with his sandpaper face allowed him to enjoy for a microsecond more the soft membrane covering that fruit. He tittered on the inside as her hair tickled his nose. He watched her jump on the horse and press her legs



against him. Tom Cruise had no saddle. Zé Luiz was envious of him.

Vanessa got off and came back, fretting.

“Silly me, Zé Luiz. I knew I was forgetting something. I came here specially for that!”

“Please come in, dear,” Mizz Orchid came over to say. “And how ’bout some rice balls now?”

“Yes please, thank you.”

Zé Luiz handed her the four rice balls that would have complemented his dinner and his mother’s. Discreetly, he took his dirty boots outside and came back. Vanessa was munching on the snacks with glee. She stuck on the tips of her fingers the grains of rice that fell on her bust and ate them with little kisses.

“Mizz Orchid, Diogo is coming to spend a week at the big house with his American girlfriend,” she announced. “They are like you, they don’t like to eat anything made of critters.”

“Lordy!” Mizz Orchid chuckled. “Two more crazy folk in this world.”

Zé Luiz took advantage of his mother’s laugh and let his own loose as well, in a stampede of pure joy. In Vanessa’s presence, he was a paradox of excitement and timidity. He was being consumed: a lit torch.

Vanessa wrapped her soft arm around Mizz Orchid’s elbow:

“You aren’t crazy by any means. Your friend, Mrs. Silvanira, is a Seventh-day Adventist and doesn’t eat meat. Do you by any chance call her crazy?”

“Don’t reckon I do,” said a correct Mizz Orchid.

“But my mother don’t even drink milk,” intervened Zé Luiz.

Mizz Orchid explained:

“Nope, I can’t swallow that stuff. If I needed to nurse, I’d have people’s milk cuz milk from critters makes me sick.”

Zé Luiz looked at their visitor, self-conscious. He shook his head:

"That's a helluva picky woman, Vanessa."

His mother begged their pardon:

"I was just born wrong, may God forgive me."

"Not wrong, Mizz Orchid. Different. But don't worry. We see all kinds of things in this world. Look at the mother of that American girlfriend of Diogo's, for example."

"She don't drink milk either?" Zé Luiz wondered.

"Not only does she not drink milk, she does not accept anything that has animal in it. Leather shoes? Doesn't wear them. Wool coat? Won't wear one. She won't even visit a zoo."

"A woman like that needs a washing board to keep her busy!" interjected an indignant Zé Luiz.

"But the weirdest thing is that, even with that problem of avoiding animals in everything, she takes care of like twenty or thirty black cats in her house."

Mizz Orchid crossed herself:

"Devil be gone! I bet she got some deal with the Evil One."

Vanessa was amused:

"The lady is tame, she's good. Diogo said she treats the cats like royalty and that she gave them names of musical notes. Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, and so forth."

"Poor Diogo, having to put up with a mother-in-law like that," Mizz Orchid lamented. "A woman that can't stand wool, that won't use leather, that gives cats musical names. And folks say I'm the fussy one."

Vanessa unwrapped her arm from that of the peasant:

"Mizz Orchid, there's a silver lining in every cloud. Your fussiness is going to make you a little money. My Aunt Marcela wants you to stay at the big house the week that Diogo and his girlfriend are there. You'll make their meals."

Mizz Orchid was happy to take on the task. Being paid to live for a week at the home of a rich family. Being paid to stay for a week without touching dead critters. But leaving Zé Luiz alone for so long... She began to worry. She would have to

arrange for his meals in advance. She would have to buy a dozen cans of spam at Norato's store on credit. She got sad.

"Aunt Marcela can pay you double," Vanessa insisted. "I'll make the argument that your work is that of a specialist."

Zé Luiz perked up:

"Don't fret about me, mother. I'll eat in town."

Great, thought Mizz Orchid, there goes my extra money. Zé Luiz would have lunch at McDonald's. He'd go to all three of them: the one on the main drag, the one close to the school, and the other one, at the hospital. He'd have coffee at the cheese-bread shack, Casa do Pão-de-Queijo, in the main square, at the one next to the notary, and at the other one, next to the bank. He'd invite that hooker Doralice to go with him. He'd spend early Sunday afternoon at Norato's store, getting plastered.

"You reckon Mrs. Marcela could arrange some job at the big house for Zé Luiz too?" Mizz Orchid timidly suggested.

The young man protested.

"I already got plenty to do, mother." He spied Vanessa and, ill at ease, tried a more convincing argument: "And I need to take care of Mortandela."

Vanessa nibbled the tip of her finger.

"I'll talk to Aunt Marcela about all this and then come by to tell you what came of it."

Zé Luiz went to watch Vanessa spread her legs over the horse's back.

"Don't forget to set our little pig free, Zé Luiz," she said, and galloped off toward the road.

The light of Mizz Orchid's house kept shrinking until it vanished behind the sparse vegetation. Vanessa dismounted, tied the reins to a branch of a purple jacaranda tree and put the palm of one hand against the tree trunk. She turned her face down, stuck the index finger of her other hand down her throat, and vomited up everything she had just eaten. It wasn't so bad to vomit. The food had barely been attacked by the digestive fluids. There wasn't the slightest possibility of adding even one gram to her figure. Vanessa mounted Tom Cruise and was off to the big

house. She was still beautiful. She confirmed her beauty every day, not based on the ambiguous decision of the mirror, but on men's reactions. She was capable of being, at the same time, gluttonous, slender and beautiful. She was a bulimic. Bulimia was not a problem, but a gift. Princess Diana Spencer and actress Jane Fonda were also that way: they ate too much and then they threw up the excess. That's why they were always beautiful and slim.

Mizz Orchid offered to help Zé Luiz get Mortandela out of the pigpen without letting the other pigs escape. He refused. Mother should stay at home and avoid getting a chill. Grabbing pigs was a man's work. But he accepted her suggestion not to tie the animal's legs with rope because tightening it might cut into the flesh and break a bone. He hung the flashlight around his neck with a long piece of twine. He put his work boots on, grabbed a burlap sack from the tool shed, put the flashlight on underneath his armpit and went into the pigpen. He was careful to close the gate. The wood creaked, tearing the silence and making fun of the chirping of the crickets. He held the burlap sack open with both hands. Here, Mortandela. The pigs were resting nose to nose in a corner of the pen. Their chests, bellies and legs were fermenting on the fetid bed of mud and feces. Here, Mortandela, come here, sweetie. The pigs raised their heads in his direction, the beam of light reflecting in their intense eyes with thick lashes. Zé Luiz approached them slowly. Mortandela saw the sack open its dark mouth wide. Alert, she stood up. In an instant she was being swallowed up. Captive inside a belly, she thrashed and squealed. Her protests mixed with those of Nuno, Topete, Big Snout and all the others; they took off through the mud, crashing into the rotten boards. Mortandela knew the alert of the squeals and the stampedes as well as the danger of wide-open mouths. What happened after them was the smell of blood. She was dragged on the ground, inside the mouth — of the belly, of the trap — and anticipated the pain of death. The mouth came open. Mortandela sniffed the outside and ran to the life that was waiting for her in the dark of the night, far away from there, far from the site that stayed behind. Dumb animal, said Zé Luiz, amused by the way the sow fled. In the language of grunts, the others were

discussing what had happened. Together in a corner, they waited for the fright to evaporate along with the mud gas.

Zé Luiz took advantage of the heat of the night to rid himself of the smelly mud of the pigpen in the creek that flowed behind their house. He rinsed his clothes, his boots and the burlap sack, and he set them down with the flashlight on the bank. His mother would scrub that filth with soap the next day. Naked, he lay down in the bed of pebbles and sand, his head resting on a miniature waterfall. The creek had once been cleaner and more copious, almost a river. Now there wasn't enough water even to cover his skin and keep the bugs off him. He had to chase them away with one of his hands. The other remained submerged, close to his sex, the water lapping at it. If his water snake raised its head, Zé Luiz joked, he could make Vanessa come in the palm of his hand. He massaged the snake's head with secret fingers. The light of his house was off. The moon was the largest defect in the darkness; stars poked through. In the bed of the creek, in the waterbed, Zé Luiz and Vanessa embraced. He closed his eyes.

He let his serpent go and woke up. He grabbed the flashlight to see what shape a certain noise coming from the woods might have. It was Mortandela coming his way, speaking Gruntese. Her mouth was like a smile. She entered the water, at his feet, and began to bathe. Zé Luiz kicked her leg hard, Get outta here, you pest. Mortandela cried out and fled the water. If the guys had seen that!, imagined Zé Luiz. They would mock him at Norato's store: Zé Luiz with a hard-on, taking a bath with his sow, they'd shout to one another. Damn beast. Mortandela was grunting low, she was turning the creekside over with her restless nose. She avoided planting the leg he had kicked. Zé Luiz felt pity.

At five in the morning, when he set off for work, Mortandela was napping next to the pen. Through the gap between a board and the ground, her nose rested against Jatoba's. She woke up, wagged her tail and followed Zé Luiz between the chicken coop and the stable. She was still limping. Get outta here, you pest. He put a small basket of eggs in the horse cart, hitched it to Chuisco, sat down on the seat and set off. Mortandela

accompanied them in a stumbling trot. He whipped Chuvisco and took off, leaving Mortandela behind.

An hour late, Mizz Orchid went out to serve the slop and saw Mortandela asleep with her nose pressed against a board of the pen. Here Mortandela, sweetie. The sow ate from an old cooking-oil can and the others from the trough.

Mizz Orchid worked in the chicken coop, at the sink and in the cornfield, the sow keeping her company. She noticed her limp. The two chatted a bit, each in her own language, kindly understanding each other, with no wide-open mouths, chases or smell of blood. Before going in, Mizz Orchid rubbed her belly, the sow lying on her back, her tail dusting the ground. Mortandela found herself alone again and went to scratch the boards of the pigpen. She tried to dig a tunnel underneath. She gave off little grunts. In Mizz Orchid's opinion, she was crying.

Zé Luiz was late for dinner again. Mizz Orchid was already having her bean soup. She had to reheat her son's, since it had long gone cold in the pot. The soup included chitlins that the owner of the farm distributed to his hired hands charging small deductions in their salaries. Zé Luiz remembered to leave his dirty boots outside, but entered holding a chicken with a wrung neck.

"To cook today, mother."

He put the bird on the sink. She was still flapping her wings. Her neck hung limp, stretched out. A long thread of goop was coming out of her open beak. Mizz Orchid hid an urge to throw up. She was getting old, and the proximity of death brings people the ugliness of nauseas and antipathies. She didn't eat any more. She served her son his soup with an ear of roasted corn on the cob.

"Tomorrow I'm gonna be late again, mother."

"Another of them get-togethers at Norato's store?"

"Yes. We call them meetings. The guys agreed to bring food for a change. Sometimes we get tired of the spam Norato gives us. I said I'd bring chicken and corn."

Mizz Orchid sat down with her back to the sink to avoid seeing the chicken drool. With a little luck, she wouldn't hear her either, in case the poor thing could still flap a dying wing.

"And what you all talk about at them meetin's?" she asked with a meek voice. She felt a sudden lack of energy, likely the weariness that attacks old women of fifty after they've seen so many things that just aren't right. The presence of the dead chicken froze her shoulders.

"We talk about a lotta things that gotta be talked about there and only there for now," was the whole of Zé Luiz's talk. "But one thing I can tell you in advance is that there's plenty folk against the modernization of Bezerra Leitão's farm."

"Cuz there's lotsa critters poopin' and takin' drugs all in the same place?" she ventured.

"For that and for a lotta other things. When the time's right, I'll 'splain it all to you."

Mizz Orchid was curious about the meetings. She thought she'd have a lot to say if she could participate. She'd just have to be careful not to say too many foolish things.

"Is there only men at the meetin's?"

"No, women too."

"So can I go?"

Zé Luiz snickered:

"No, mother, you can't. If you go, who'll make my supper?"

"What if I made supper beforehand?"

"Then, who knows."

Mizz Orchid took her son's reply as a promise. She put water on the wood stove to boil, her eyes almost closed to exclude the chicken from her line of sight. She was really sleepy, she wanted to lie down. But she would still have to pluck, eviscerate, chop and season the bird. And cook it with corn. And wash up. Zé Luiz would do well to get a woman to cook for him. He could get married soon, with a girl who wasn't disgusted by cooking critters and didn't feel like going to meetings. Mizz

Orchid, then, would have peace. She would have time to snoop around at those meetings if she wanted to. The problem was that Zé Luiz's girlfriend was Doralice, a hooker, a crazy woman who painted her fingernails green, her lips purple and her hair yellow. But if the lady took good care of him...

"Zé Luiz, does Doralice go to them meetin's?" she asked all of a sudden.

Zé Luiz's eyes bulged out, he changed the subject:

"Mother, the water. It's gonna boil. You'll be able to scald the chicken in just a minute. I'm goin' outside to check on Mortandela."

"Mmm, you're so affectionate with Mortandela, Zé Luiz," came a clear and pleasurable voice from outside.

It was Vanessa. She was watching mother and son through the window. An edgy Zé Luiz grabbed the flashlight and went out. He didn't even say hello. He looked for Tom Cruise. The darn horse had decided to move quietly like the breeze, he thought. But instead of Tom Cruise he found a bicycle. Mortandela ran in his direction, wagging her tail. Horrified, he looked back, he looked for Vanessa, Is she looking? No, she wasn't. She had gone in. He calmed down and went in too.

He should have stayed outside. What Vanessa and his mother were talking about was no less than Mortandela. Mizz Orchid was plucking the chicken, Vanessa was stealing spoonfuls from his bowl, and the two were talking up a storm. Mizz Orchid was saying, Mortandela followed me around all day, she doesn't want to be by herself. And Vanessa was saying, I saw this TV show saying that pigs are smart animals, smarter than dogs and three-year old children. Lordy, Mizz Orchid kidded, so they're more smarter than me!... And the two went on laughing.

Zé Luiz squared his shoulders, serious:

"I don't want that sow in my way, mother. She makes it hard for me to work."

"But we can't pen her up," said his mother. "Vanessa won't let us, ain't that right, Vanessa?"

"Right," was her reply.



"It's easy for Vanessa to talk," he complained, surprised to be so bold. "She's not the one that takes care of the animals."

Vanessa made like she hadn't heard him.

"Mmm, tasty food, Mizz Orchid."

"Care for some roasted corn, dear?"

"Yes, please, thank you."

Vanessa started to work on a cob in earnest and Zé Luiz was able to reclaim his bowl. In ecstasy, he raised to his mouth the spoon that his beloved had anointed with her saliva.

Mizz Orchid left the kitchen and came back with her head covered with a kerchief soaked in lavender. She cut open the chicken to gut it and continued her conversation with Vanessa:

"No sooner had Mortandela got outta the pen and she done hurt her leg and she's limpin'."

Zé Luiz quickly explained:

"She must've stepped on a splinter."

"She must have been attacked by a dangerous beast," said Vanessa.

Zé Luiz gulped, coughed.

"God bless you, my son, careful not to choke. Vanessa, you reckon it might be better to put Mortandela back in the pigpen?"

"On the contrary. Better to let the other pigs out too."

Zé Luiz exploded:

"Not that, Vanessa! Bezerra Leitão would be upset..."

"Yes that!" his mother yelled. "Vanessa's right. A bunch of pigs together defend themselves better than one pig all by her lonesome."

Vanessa licked her fingers and stood up:

"Uncle Bezerra doesn't even have to know. So that's the way it'll be. Starting today, the gate of the pigpen will remain open."

She bid farewell with little kisses on the subaltern faces. Zé Luiz couldn't focus on the sensation of being melting

molasses on her lips. He was bothered by how asinine lady folk were, by how two nuts, one rich and educated, the other poor and ignorant, could act in solidarity in the obsessive care of half a dozen smelly pigs condemned to death, when there's so many serious problems in the world to solve.

Vanessa left but returned right away, slapping herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand.

"Silly me! I forgot the main thing, just like yesterday."

"Come on in, dear. Like some more soup?"

"Put it in a mug for me to take, Mizz Orchid. I'll be with you in a second. Since I'm here I'll use the facilities."

She went out in the yard to the cubicle of boards that comprised the outhouse and had a bucket for showering. Mizz Orchid wrapped Vanessa's snack with a plastic bag from Norato's store and went back to cleaning the chicken. She thought she heard Vanessa vomiting. She must be disgusted by tripe and blood, Mizz Orchid thought. Zé Luiz could only hear his own thoughts being chewed over with the corn on the cob.

The young lady came back from the cubicle, languid, watery eyes, misty face. She swooped up her snack.

"So then, Mizz Orchid, here's what. I spoke with Aunt Marcela. She agreed to contract you for a week for twice what the other maids get. But don't tell anyone."

Mizz Orchid's eyes lit up.

"Thank you Jesus! What's with Mrs. Marcela? I'm just gonna make some food..."

"Special food, Mizz Orchid. Diogo explained that food with nothing from animals is called vegan."

"Lordy!" The woman chuckled.

"And you, Zé Luiz, Aunt Marcela said for you to have lunch and supper at the manor house with your mother. But she doesn't have any other work for you."

"Even if she did," he grumbled. "I already got plenty to do."

Now Mizz Orchid was perturbed; she cut off the chicken's head and thighs. During her absence, her son would be idle for one Sunday afternoon plus six evenings. Mizz Orchid cut off the wings:

"Since the pigpen's gonna be empty now, Vanessa, how 'bout Zé Luiz plantin' a garden in there?"

"Good idea. I'll have my uncle's caretaker bring a bunch of starter plants. We'll call it Vanessa's Garden."

She dashed off to spread her legs over the bicycle. Anxious to accompany her to the vehicle and to contemplate the spectacle, Zé Luiz neglected to protest the decisions of the two accomplices.

The steam of the pigpen burned in the night. Lying in the dung-filled mud, the pigs looked through the gap between the boards and saw Zé Luiz coming their way. He wasn't bringing them any slop. Nor did he have rope, knife, or wide-mouth sacks. He was bringing light. He made the boards creak and opened the big gap, the passage they so wanted. Out in the non-pen, Mortandela was waiting for them. Zé Luiz drew circles of light around her, Here, Nuno, Topete, Jatobá. Go ahead, Celestino. Come on, Big Snout. Let's go, Big Pumpkin. The pigs went out, with care. The non-pen was a vast spread of land, good to discover. From every direction came sounds and smells, each one different from the last one. That stream of water up there must be nice to drink from. The sooner you get there the sooner you'll have the pleasure of bathing. The more you play in the creek bed, the more you roll in the mud on the banks, the happier you feel.

Zé Luiz went back home by himself, with no sow on his trail, as it should be. Damn sow, from now on she wouldn't even know he was there, she'd be with the gang of pigs, as she should. Ingrate.

**Fa**

Meat grown in the laboratory from a single cell. Bob was excited. Once again, in the convoluted course of the history of civilization, human ingenuity was solving ethical problems through technology. The announcement of the miracle performed by American and Dutch scientists was timely. It was exactly what Bob needed to mend the torn fabric of his marriage, now in the midst of another crisis. It was the argument that would silence, once and for all, his vegan wife. Bob came into the house so raring to tell Sybil the news that he didn't even greet the yawning whiskered shapes of black velvet under the lampshades.

"Sybil!" he shouted up at the bottom of the stairs. "I have something very important to tell you! Come downstairs please!"

Sybil had shut herself in the upstairs quarters. She was refusing to see him. She was turning down his meals. She was explaining no thought she might be having nor any decision she might be making. Ignited by a phone call from her daughter, the crisis was already a week old. During that time, Sybil had addressed him only once. Thank you for poisoning my food, she had snarled.

At first, Bob didn't understand the reason for her fury. He thought he had made a mistake preparing some dish. Or used some tofu that was spoiled or past the expiration date. Then he thought he might have said something that he shouldn't have. He remembered his talk with Diogo in the kitchen. He put things together and solved the puzzle. He had no idea that Sybil could take so seriously his mixing a non-vegan morsel or two into her meals! He could swear that she actually knew all about it. That whacky feminist wasn't born yesterday. She was a smooth operator. She was making a scene to keep up her revolutionary façade. Deep inside she approved of all the ingredients he used! Or at least that was what he wanted... Bob took a deep breath. He had to give his woman the news.

“You’re going to like the news, Sybil,” he shouted again, voice trembling. “For God’s sake, come down for a bit. Then go back up and relax, love...”

He sat down on the sofa. Semifusa jumped onto his lap. His legs automatically came together to accommodate her. From his briefcase he got out the prospectus sent by the company doing research on the viability of producing artificial meats for large-scale consumption. He re-read the information. He wanted to have it fresh in his mind when he debated it with Sybil. A single cell of muscle is cultivated in a thin, flat wide membrane. The resulting material is stretched and turned into a slender plate. That plate is removed from the membrane and superimposed on similar plates, thus composing the irresistible delicacy that, for practical purposes for the time being, was being called lab meat. Due to its immense economic potential, combined with its near-zero environmental impact, lab meat garnered the support of the Dutch government, which is contributing to the research effort.

“Sybil!”

Damn. The bitch was starting to get on his nerves. Some day Bob would lose his patience and then she would see. Why didn’t she kick him out of her house once and for all? Maybe it really was better to live alone. No one to reprimand his burping. No one to cut his fingernails “before they get too long, they look like Treble Clef’s claws, vain image-conscious women dream of having fingernails like yours.”

No one to tell him not to chew with his mouth open.

No one to tell him to take his hand off his crotch.

No one to tell him to speak low.

Being able to fart at will.

“Sybil, are you coming or not?”

From her cushion beneath the lamp, Fa floated to the floor and from there to Bob’s left shoulder, where she perched and dug her claws into the back of the couch. Legs together, shoulder paralyzed, Bob turned the page of the prospectus with movements imperceptible to cats that want to sleep in peace. A single cell of muscle can meet the worldwide demand for meat for a year. In the manufacturing process, it is possible to replace

the fatty acid Omega 6 with the healthy Omega 3, thus avoiding problems with cholesterol. The long-term projection is to offer customized service, and customers will be able to acquire individual kits to prepare beef, pork, chicken, fish and others, in their preferred consistencies and with the necessary nutrients for personal health.

What a find, this in vitro meat! And best of all, Bob had been invited to be part of the project. At first the invention had seemed repulsive to him. But after reading the prospectus he was convinced. According to the statement of an employee of the National Agency for Animal Welfare, the new product — with no face, brain or nervous system — would prove to be even more appealing to people than nature's products, which are capable of suffering.

Sybil just had to see the novelty that Bob had brought her! She had to learn with him! She had to admit that her anti-meat fixation was no more than an anachronistic bias.

"Sybil!" he called again, in a slightly muffled voice to be considerate to the sensitive ears of Fa and Semifusa.

To eat meat, in itself, is not cruel, Bob would explain to her. You just have to look at the issue from the right angle. Sybil looked at the consumption of meats from an archaic vantage. Her philosophy still relied on farms and slaughterhouses. She should do philosophy with her eyes on the future! Her perspective should be the laboratory, the thin membranes and the superimposed slender plates. In Bob's hands, Sybil would get out of the past directly to the vanguard. He read, for the third time, the letter that a manager of the company had sent him.

*Dear Mr. Bob Beefeater*

*As demonstrated in the attached prospectus, laboratory or in vitro meat will be the number one source of protein for future generations. In a world more and more lacking in natural resources, and with vast populations doubling the consumption of meats every ten years, or even five, as in the respective cases of China and India, laboratory meat will prove to be the best if not*

*the only solution for environmental problems, as well as ethical problems inherent in the raising of animals to feed humans.*

*Nevertheless, given the profoundly innovative character of meat made in a laboratory, it is to be expected, understandably, that initially there might be strong resistance to its consumption. Therefore it will be necessary to undertake a broad worldwide multimedia campaign in all sectors of society, urban and rural alike, with the aim of creating public demand for the product.*

*Said campaign will be launched as soon as research into large-scale production of in vitro meat has concluded, which should be in a period of three to five years. It will encompass everything from advertisements to school-lunch programs, including demonstrations of support by animal welfare organizations, musical events to encourage respect for the environment, cable-television series, and books of recipes with our product as main ingredient.*

*We are honored to request your prestigious collaboration. We believe that a book of new recipes with the Chef Bob Beefeater label will play a fundamental role in moving the consumption of in vitro meat forward in a significant segment of the market.*

*We are at your service to provide further details about the various issues involved in this project and to discuss your inestimable contribution in the near future.*

*Most sincerely yours,*

*Annemie Van Dijk*

*Marketing Manager*

“Ssssy...” whistled Bob, sighing and giving up on calling his partner.

He puckered his lips. He wanted to enjoy a kiss from Quaver, who had jumped up on the back of the sofa and was sniffing at his lips assiduously. The cat concluded the olfactory investigation and set herself down on his right shoulder, in the same position as Fa. With his lap and shoulders occupied, and

bereft of the possibility of shouting, the chef considered taking a catnap. He tossed his head back. The comforting, sleep-inducing purring of the three cats rattled on his muscles. Sybil would have to come downstairs, sooner or later. Bob would wait for her.

Sybil would call at some point. It was just a question of time. Karen had already told her everything that she should. Now she had to concentrate on her work and make sure that her cell phone was working right. That was all she should do: work and keep an ear on the telephone. Without anxiety. Just in case, she checked her voice mail. No messages. She finished fixing the part of the fence damaged by a falling pine during the windstorm. She had been working by herself for two hours. The interns had not yet arrived and at that point they would no longer be coming. This time the damage did not seem to be so bad, taking into account how long the fence was and how strong the winds were. That was the opinion of the employees who were inspecting the entire perimeter of the sixteen square miles of pastures, woods, lakes and streams that comprised the sanctuary for former prisoners of the species *Elephas maximus*.

From the stream came the sound of trumpets playing contemporary art music emitted by the refugees. Karen was familiar with the nuances and intonations of each voice, the sounds of desires, complaints and opinions. The voices coming from the stream were those of Loretta, rescued from a banned circus in Florida, and Madeleine, freed from a zoo in a frigid corner of Illinois, which had been closed due to pressure from the local community. Loretta and Madeleine were enjoying their immersion in water and mud, now that their feet were free of the infections caused by immobility and other effects of decades of servitude. Karen thought she could detect in their trumpet-voices, besides signs of pleasure and humor, comments about issues, though she couldn't quite identify what they were.

The phone rang, Karen inarushello?

It was not Sybil. Karen wilted.

It was a volunteer in charge of renovations and expansion. He needed her help to weld metal braces in the new quarantine stable. She would gladly help him, she replied, but first she had



to fill the wagons with bales of hay and fruits for the afternoon snack, and feed the animals.

"I can't wait that long," the volunteer said. "I still have to go to the orphanage to read to the kids."

Karen pondered the matter, she couldn't afford to waste the good will of that rare good soul, so motivated to work hard, and for free, out of pure respect for animals, human and nonhuman. She agreed to help the volunteer with the welding before feeding the elephants, but she asked him to do her the favor of filling the wagons with food in order to gain time.

She put her tools away in the little four-wheel vehicle, which looked like a jeep without a top, and headed toward the stables and barns. What a day. Everything behind schedule, so much work, so few hands. And the void in her head because of Sybil.

Near the lake, the group led by Malaysia stampeded. Karen looked around for protection. She knew that the rare disturbances in the herd were caused by Regina. The elephant had been taken away from her family on a reservation in Indonesia when she was two years old to entertain circus-goers in the USA with poses she was forced to do on two feet. Traumatized by being shocked with electric prods, stuck with big hooks, and beaten with iron bars, all used in the training of elephants, Regina broke the arm of her tormentor with her trunk and crushed his chest with her stomping. She was condemned to death by those who wanted to avenge him. But she ended up being shipped off to the sanctuary thanks to donations and after a human battle in the courts, while the circus went out of business, boycotted by a public who heeded calls against the use of elephants and all other animals in the entertainment industry. Finally Regina was allowed to live a life comparable to that of a normal free elephant. Her new life came too late, though, for her to unlearn everything from the old one, and now she sometimes spread her terror amongst the sanctuary's entire population.

The elephants ran toward Karen. She detoured her vehicle behind a centennial tree and curled up. She covered her ears not to hear the rumbling of the passing herd. Wanda, Mirna, Carla, Alexia and all the others went around the tree and kept on

running until they got to the woods that separated the lake from the stream. Then they stopped. Regina took off in another direction.

Karen's heart rumbled the echoes of the mob. She could have been trampled. It was ridiculous that just minutes earlier she had assigned so much importance to a mere phone call. She observed the elephants. They seemed to have calmed down. Perhaps the matriarch Malaysia would embrace Mirna with her trunk. Karen had seen that sign of friendship before, on the monitor in the office, to which a camera installed near the lake transmitted images all day long. It was possible that the affectionate gesture was repeated often. Who could know for sure? The privacy of the elephants in the natural environment was respected rigorously by all the humans involved in the project, who only sought them out to serve them their snacks. The contact that Karen had just had with the herd was an unusual — and, in a way, enviable — occurrence. She wiped her brow, swallowed the dust in her throat, and set off again to the stables.

Sybil might have called during the stampede. Once again a simple phone call seemed to be more grandiose than charging elephants... Karen needed to control her anxiety. She would only check her messages when she arrived at her destination, a little before welding the metal braces.

This time she was betting on the definitive separation of the couple, Sybil and Bob. This was her big chance to have Sybil's love again. They could go back to living together, in the old house Karen was renting, even with the most allergenic cats that Sybil might want to transport to the state of Mississippi. Sybil had much to give to feminism in the south, a region less familiar with the cause of anti-patriarchy, Karen had said on the phone. You're wasting energy, being an advocate there in Massachusetts, the politically correct paradise. Mississippi needs you more than they do. Just call me, say I'm on my way. Put the cats on the plane and come. Bob can fend for himself, he has his own business, money, contacts. He could even have custody of a couple of cats, since he's so attached to them. You and Bob have no business together, never did and never will. You belong beside me. We have so much in common! We both advocate for animal

rights. We're both feminists. We're both vegans. We're both women.

In the room that she had shared with Karen and then Bob, Sybil lamented her mistakes in silence. On top of the wardrobe, Mi was witness to her torment with the patience of one who has nine lives. The door was open and should remain so. In times of crisis Bob would never enter without being asked in. Besides, Sybil needed peace, and few things in this world are as tumultuous as a closed door in a house with cats full of curiosity and willingness to scratch. She felt relieved because she had had a serious talk with Karen about Bob's sabotage and because she knew she could count on her great friend's discretion. She wouldn't be able to stand being seen as a failure by her group of feminists for animal rights in Cambridge. It was degrading enough to have been unmasked by her own daughter, to have betrayed her confidence and devotion. She remembered that she still owed Karen a call. She made up her mind to call later, when she felt ready. Her former companion could wait.

Sybil found it hard to admit, but the truth was that Bob had put animal ingredients in her food because she had allowed it. Her acquiescence to her mate's dishonesty had run beneath the surface, like a nighttime dream to be forgotten during the day. And Sybil had been sleepwalking. A soup with a hint of burnt skin? Carrots with a taste of ammonia? Tomatoes sweating droplets of thick, hot, sticky oil... All of Bob's sinister alchemy was deciphered by Sybil's senses. But hardly a peep from her consciousness, suspended in limbo, clouded by the pact of harmony with her spouse. When it did speak up, Sybil responded that in practice the harm caused to animals by her going along with the sabotage was next to nothing, and therefore irrelevant. It was up to Megan, with her pure convictions and commitment, to wake her from her stupor. Indeed, the harm caused to animals by Sybil's collusion, her daughter had reminded her, might be small relative to the enormous suffering that humans put them through every minute of every day. But so what if the harm was small and the advantages for Sybil and Bob were big? What mattered was not the consequences of Sybil's acts. What really mattered was that Sybil had the duty to respect the interest of the animals not to be used, period. Sybil had disrespected that interest! She had

treated animals as means to her own ends! She had violated rights! She had violated animal rights! This, in itself, was bad enough, Megan had noted. And coming from an activist with a strong record like Sybil's, it was even worse because it meant a defeat for the movement. Sybil choked back tears and turned toward Mi. The cat was watching her from on top of the wardrobe, full of majesty.

There was another kind of harm to keep in mind: the harm that Sybil was doing to herself. She felt like a total loser. Her attempt to live according to her ethical principles had failed. She, who believed that serving as an example to other people was one of the best forms of activism, had ended up personifying the counter-example. Sybil had become the living proof that veganism is a mistaken cause.

Under Mi's magnanimous watch, she let her tears gush and ran to the bathroom to wash her face. Since she was already there, she cleaned the feces buried in the litter of an old bathtub. She felt the flashing light of an insight. If she owned the responsibility for her errors, then she had the power of redemption. She needed to see herself in Megan's purity and restart the struggle. Megan with her certainty, dedication and sweetness had inspired her omnivorous boyfriend to expand his animal consciousness; she would also be the model for the rebirth of her mother. Megan: the same baby whom Sybil had let toast in the carcinogenic sun, the daughter for whom she had never had time.

Sybil allowed herself one last salty, piercing sob, and took a cold shower. She put on her bathrobe and covered her wet hair with an organic cotton towel twisted into a turban. She was ready to return from her self-exile. But first she wanted to see what Bob had to show her. She just had to go downstairs and see. The saboteur was down there, waiting for her with some news that she would like.

He was sleeping sitting down and snoring facing up. Three cats were asleep on his shoulders and lap, keeping him on the sofa like a climbing plant on a trestle.

"Bob!" the woman fumed.

Ten green spots opened in the dark shapes asleep in the living room. Bob chomped the bit of his snoring. His sleepy hand, reaching for his testicles, weighed on Semifusa. The kitten ran away from the errant hand and the treacherous lap. Fa jumped off the shoulder in motion, and Quaver from the other. Do and Ti leaped from two lamp-lit cushions. In what was left of a dream, Bob saw a line of cats trot up the stairs.

Sybil stood before him arms crossed. The organic towel turban highlighted a face twisted by the weeping of several days. Groggy, Bob put the prospectus together with the marketing manager's letter, which his catnap had knocked to the floor, and handed them to his wife:

"Look, my love. Lab meat. No brain, no nervous system. A revolution in ethics."

Sybil plopped down in an armchair and read the papers in the light of the lamp that had soothed Do minutes ago. One of her eyebrows rose to encompass the implications of the text in all its breadth. For the first time in years there were no cats in the living room. A silent and furry tension weighed on the rooms upstairs.

Karen's cell phone didn't ring or record any message while she was helping the volunteer weld the metal braces of the new quarantine stable. Her anxiety had been replaced by a sleepy sadness that further delayed the completion of the task. Since there was simply too much to do, and since Sybil had shown such a lack of consideration for her impassioned pleas, Karen would not be able to serve the afternoon snacks on time. Nor would she finish the installation of the water heater on schedule, which would force the sanctuary directors to put off, one more time, the rescue of Sebang from that gloomy zoo in Alaska. The elephant's tuberculosis might get worse and cause her to lose her life! And watch out, Sybil, if that were to happen. If Sebang were to die of tuberculosis up there in Alaska, Karen would have to take the initiative to call Sybil, not to implore her to try once again a relationship she recalled so fondly, but rather to throw in the face of that accomplice of saboteurs of vegan food further responsibility for the failures of the movement for peace between humans and animals!

"Karen, do you hear that?" asked the volunteer.

Karen awoke from her melodrama to a muffled rumbling coming from the area of the food barn. Together with the volunteer, she exited the stable and saw Regina running toward the wagons hitched to a little jeep which he had filled with hay and fruits. The area access gate was open. The volunteer's eyes widened:

"How did Regina manage to open the gate?"

Karen stammered:

"She... she... she... just opened it. After all she has the intelligence of a dolphin, besides a trunk!..."

She felt like a buffoon. If someone discovered that she had failed to close the gate when she arrived, she'd be fired. Dr. Hernandez, medical doctor and director of the sanctuary, would say that Karen didn't know how to work with large animals. She would allege that her lack of ability to deal with a small personal problem was interfering with the progress of a project of monumental proportions.

Regina knocked the feed to the ground to find those items she considered the tastiest. Frustrated with the hay, the watermelons, the bananas and the pineapples, she turned one of the wagons over with her trunk and head butts. Karen dialed a number on her cell:

"Come to the food barn, Dr. Hernandez! Regina is having a nervous breakdown!"

The veterinarian was evaluating a patient with arthritis in the infirmary. She responded slowly that she would be there in a minute. Regina stomped on a bunch of bananas. In the distance, the voice of the matriarch Malaysia vibrated with a nuance that expressed a complaint against the delay in the serving of afternoon snacks.

Dr. Hernandez finally showed up, calm in her hiking boots, and armed with a bag of apples and a dart gun with etorphine. She didn't intend to use the sedative, but she felt safer with it on hand any time she was with an agitated four-ton patient. Karen admired her lovely androgynous figure and the many colors of her hair. She envied how close she was with the elephants. She liked to see her combine medicine, love and

reverence to try to reverse the terrible effects of human barbarity on the majesty of their minds and bodies.

In a girlish voice, Dr. Hernandez directed some sweet words to Regina, in English and Spanish. She rolled two apples on the ground to the feet of the traumatized patient. Regina chewed them up with pleasure and extended her trunk asking for more. The doctor gave her another, and used the rest of them to attract her past the gate. Having ingested all the goodies, Regina showed her gratitude by wrapping her trunk around her benefactor and touching her face with her enormous forehead. The doctor marched back to the barn.

"She just wanted some apples," she explained. "It's her favorite treat."

The volunteer looked sideways to check Karen's reaction to the doctor's explanation. Karen was engrossed in the contemplation of Regina's calm demeanor upon meeting the herd. The volunteer figured they were spoiling that elephant, but they must know what they were doing. He called the orphanage to let them know that he'd be a little late and, together with Dr. Hernandez, helped Karen to put the little chuck wagon back in order. Then he went to finish his job, only to be upset by the discovery that she had welded some metal braces upside down.

Karen sat at the steering wheel of the vehicle to pull the food wagons out to the woods, where the herd would have its feast. Under her multicolored head of hair, Dr. Hernandez aimed a sunny smile Karen's way:

"Karen, when you come back could you help me in the infirmary? I have to get Arabella's feet soaking in buckets with therapeutic solutions."

It would be an honor to be able to assist with the procedure, but Karen wouldn't have time. She had to work on the installation of the heating system in the new quarantine stable.

"Oh... that's OK... I can take care of Arabella by myself," the luminous colors faded.

That light and those colors still did Karen's eyes well.

"Will you be on call tonight?" she asked, turning off her cell phone. "I'll be happy to help you. We can have dinner together and then come back to work."

The doctor said she would not be on call that night, but she accepted the invitation for dinner.

Sybil finished reading about the in vitro meat and placed the brochure next to the cushion under the lamp. She could feel Bob's nose, red with expectation, poking into her face. She gave into that long-distance nasal pressure: the sooner she wrapped up the epilogue of her old story, the quicker she would begin the first chapter of her new story.

"Are you going to participate in that lab meat project?" she asked, her steely voice in her stony throat.

Bob's light green eyes filled with a sea of hope. A light pink optimism softened the fever of his nose:

"No doubt, my dear! Isn't it a fabulous project? Billions of lives will be spared without sacrificing the natural human propensity to ingest meat."

"And how about the animals used for research and in tests of its production and product approval?"

Bob swallowed, he leaned his torso forward:

"You make an interesting point, Sybil. I understand that you might be worried now about those animals in particular. But try to look at this phenomenon with your eyes on a future without farms of sentient beings or slaughterhouses."

"And what's wrong with a present and a future both vegan? What's wrong with a plant-based diet?"

"What's wrong is that it's a dream nobody can make come true."

"Well, most humans live, and always have, on a plant-based diet."

"I'm not talking about poor people. Nor about the past."

"So you're talking about today's middle class and above. They're constantly exposed to propaganda for meats, eggs and dairy. Educate them about ethical, nutritional, gastronomical and



ecological reasons for veganism and bingo, the dream comes true. Now excuse me I have to make a very important phone call.”

“But Sybil...”

“No if ands or buts. That in vitro meat project is an affront to the rights of nonhumans that is happening at this very moment, and therefore has to be stopped immediately.”

Bob’s nose turned shades from baby pink to purple:

“Please, Sybil, be reasonable. Sometimes you sound a little... obsessive to me. You isolate yourself in the idea of a perfection in the vegetable reign that you’re just not going to achieve, and then you won’t budge. I think you’d be more successful if you concentrated on the struggle for animals exploited for other things, instead of our food. Like dogs that pull sleds...”

“You don’t have to roll out all the same old examples,” Sybil was irked.

He ignored her request. He went on:

“...until they keel over dead of exhaustion in those races in Alaska. The baby seals clubbed to death in Canada...”

“I said you don’t have to repeat...”

“The animals humiliated in circuses and imprisoned in zoos. Fish, puppies, rabbits, kittens, birds, iguanas and beetles for sale in pet shops...”

She raised her voice:

“I focus on freeing all animals from the human yoke, period!”

“But don’t you think that scientists put humans at the top of the food chain for a good reason? You yourself keep telling me that ninety five percent of the animals that we pen up and kill are those that go to our dinner plates, don’t you?”

She bore her hard pupils into his face:

“I keep saying that to see if you will understand why the abolitionist struggle has to have an emphasis on diet!”

"I do understand and I agree in part," said Bob, seeing three black notes at the top of the stairs. Semifusa, Fa and Do were reconnoitering the living room to see if the time was right for them to return. Do tried descending a few steps. Bob resumed his case. "But you must admit that consumption of lab meat will considerably lower the number of animals slaughtered."

"Sure?" Sybil uttered, stiff in her bathrobe. "When soy meat was created, people thought the same thing. Look what happened. Today's supermarkets have plenty of soy meat and soy dairy. Even so, never has so much meat been eaten on the planet. And consumption increases every day."

"Sybil, darling, soy meat might satisfy your taste. But, for people who like meat, it leaves a lot to be desired."

"Well, like I said, that in vitro meat project should be stopped right away. But, just for the sake of argument, let's suppose that in vitro meat actually ends up being a nutritious product, not harmful to your health, non-polluting, and tasting just like natural meat. Such a success, which I doubt, is not going to change the concept of meat-eating as something positive, but rather reinforce it. It seems paradoxical, but the success of lab meat will encourage demand for real meat."

Bob twisted in the couch, in his boat adrift. Maybe he was not ready to tackle the new wave of arguments of that pigheaded do-gooder. His attention escaped to the five cats coming back in the room and carefully sniffing out possible accommodations for a nice nap. Quaver got up on his lap and Do on Sybil's. She massaged the cat's body and continued:

"Demanding carnivorous consumers will emerge, determined to venture beyond the routine meals made with lab meat, just to do something different. And carnivorous earth mommas and poppas will emerge, anxious to devour real animals, just because they're repulsed by artificial stuff. For these demanding buyers and these nature folks, there will be new establishments specialized in the bodies of real animals, raised on organic farms or poached from their natural environments."

"But, at that point, laws will be much more advanced and the consumption of real animals will be banned!" Bob said.

And he immediately regretted it. He had let slip the possibility of prohibition of consuming animals! He himself had just advocated the one thing he thought would be hell on earth, the end of freedom for palates and appetites, the Vegan Dictatorship! He felt the bottom of his sea of hope being stirred in conflicting currents. At great cost, he managed to maintain calm on the surface of his gaze. Sybil went on:

“With the prohibition of consuming real animals, fewer individuals will be slaughtered, no doubt. But prohibition is not enough. If society as a whole doesn’t get educated, if it doesn’t make a conscious ethical leap toward eating only plants, banning the consumption of real animals will spur the emergence of a black market for those animals. And I don’t have to remind you of the horrors inflicted on the victims of illegal trafficking. As long as our thought remains stagnant in the notion that our meat consumption is legitimate and that animals of other species exist to be used by our own, the world will continue to be this nightmare of violence and devastation.”

Bob grasped for a response to all that, a lifesaver. He raised his nose above the crashing waves and took a deep breath. To his surprise, he found that that damn woman was right. The logical reasoning that she was setting forth was convincing him of an idea as true as two plus two equals four. But he reacted quickly: So what? Why should he be obligated to surrender to Sybil’s logical reasoning? If she herself did not give due importance to reason! Wasn’t she the one who thought that the interests of irrational animals carry as much weight as the interests of the rational ones? Therefore Bob should not give more weight to Sybil’s logical reasoning than to the irrepressible inclination that he had toward being carnivorous! So, it was crystal clear to him. He would not drown in a Sea of Polemics. Now he could swim toward the Isle of Certainty. He chortled.

Sybil smoothed her face out in a draft of a smile:

“What’s the joke? I’ve done nothing but cry for a week.”

Bob felt more relaxed. He had reached shore and was lounging in a soft sand, kissed by the rising sun. Semifusa, Fa and Re were already bathing in the light of three lamps.

"I was thinking here to myself, love," gurgled a bubbly Bob, "that you and I can be happy together without my having to accept your logical reasoning."

Sybil crumpled her face anew. He went ahead:

"You may be perfectly correct, according to your impeccable enlightened philosophy, your tight logic. But look at me like you're looking at an animal. Look at me like at Do, Re or Treble Clef."

"I know where you're going," Sybil cut him off. "I prefer to look at you as a gorilla or an orangutan. A primate like us, and not a carnivorous animal. A primate that feeds essentially on plants."

Bob got nervous again. Quaver jumped off his lap.

"Then look at me as a human with bad reasoning and faulty logic. Look at me as the majority of human beings: as mediocre. Like most humans, I like meat and I want to eat meat. Just as you love Re, Do and all other beings with shaky logic, you can love me too? Can't you?"

Sybil moved Do to the cushion, jumped off the couch and shouted:

"No, I can't love you! You're a cynical and dishonest person! A manipulator! An opportunist!" The five cats scattered again up the stairs. "You won't sabotage my food ever again! Find somewhere else to live! Get out of my house now!"

The hopeful-green faded in the chef's watery irises. His lips paled below a suddenly enlarged nose. Sybil grabbed the prospectus and threw it into the recycle bin:

"I'm ashamed to belong to the *Homo sapiens* species when I think of how much nonsense articulate people like you have the nerve to come up with, in your rush to justify the use and abuse of other species!"

Bob drew his closed lips into his mouth. His eyes jutted out at Sybil's shouting and went dark green. She kept on:

"I'm revolted by the effort, the waste, the cruel injustices so many humans are capable of, just to consume the bodies and secretions of other land and sea animals, when there are much

healthier foods! These humans accept and promote the domination, the torture, and the murder of dozens of billions of sentient beings every year, in the concentration camps they call farms and slaughterhouses, just to have the debatable pleasure of tasting a few minutes each day the fat and the blood of those innocent beings! They're capable of turning forests full of life into monotonous pastures for livestock, and of exploiting those same pastures until they become sterile dust! They're capable of decimating entire populations of wild animals to defend their herds from competing predators, and of contaminating rivers, lakes, and springs with the shit, the piss, and the drugs that build up on their farms! They're capable of investing millions of dollars in research designed to modify the genetic codes of so-called animals for consumption to create breeds more tolerant of the horrors of captivity, transport, slaughter, just to minimize the risks of their business!"

Bob held his right hand with his left, flicking the thumbnail with the pinky's nail. He could feel Sybil's corrosive irises on his face. She hollered:

"And these humans are capable of creating an extraordinary, ambitious undertaking like lab meat, just to continue serving meat to people who don't want to or can no longer consume... meat!"

Bob's eyes shot quickly to the clock. Sybil concluded:

"But these humans are incapable of lifting a finger, just one inch, to make a campaign to encourage eating healthy, tasty plant-based foods that respect animals and the environment! Not even an inch!"

Bob let his hands go. He knew most of that text by heart. He considered it to be a sort of battle hymn bravely sung by Sybil the soldier during the various crises the couple had lived through. Sybil guillotined droplets of sweat in the wrinkles of her forehead. She grabbed the phone.

"Please, Bob, go upstairs and pack your bag."

Bob planted himself on his feet. The only thing left for that hysterical feminist to do was to call the cops and accuse him of psychological abuse. He armed himself with benevolence,

metamorphosed his irritation into diplomacy and his humiliation into magnanimity. He stuck his hands in his pockets and unrolled his tongue in a murmur:

“Forgive me for having mixed improper ingredients in your meals, Sybil. I was wrong. I was extremely dishonest.”

From her organic cotton towed outfit, the woman looked at him with distrust. He advanced a little farther in the terrain that he was planning to recover:

“As for the immorality of humans using animals, I recognize that I am cynical. But I do love you. I love the cats. I am willing to negotiate, once again, a life in common without fighting. Let’s talk. Please.”

Sybil squeezed the phone. At the top of the stairs, a few pairs of oblique lights licked the humans with green tongues.

“You know, Bob, this week I talked quite a bit with Karen,” said the feminist.

Bob arched an eyebrow. So she had been digging up the past. He had forgotten the old pairing of Sybil and Karen, that activist who looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“And?...” he asked, arching the other eyebrow.

The cats came down the stairs and started investigating possibilities in the living room. From the other areas of the house the rest of the residents began to show up, one by one.

“Karen told me some things that are true. You and I have no business being together, never had and never will.”

“No surprise to hear that from a lesbian in love,” he said, slighted.

Sybil paid no mind to his comment.

“I want to associate with people who have affinities with me: animal rights advocates, vegans, feminists. And I want to move south.”

The contours of Bob’s mouth wrinkled:

“Move south? But here in Massachusetts there’s a lot more people like you!”

"For that very reason. The north doesn't need me as much. My activism will be more useful in the south. Selling this house, I'll be able to buy another of the same size and still save some money."

Bob's water-green eyes got the floor wet, not knowing where to go. Perhaps the advantages of being a bachelor awaited him in some harbor... But how to get there? His legs wobbled and he sat back down:

"I won't be able to live..." his voice trembled. "I can't live far from..."

Sybil put her hand on his shoulder, a charitable consolation:

"Bob, you're a grown man, of course you'll be able to live far from me."

"I mean far from the cats, Sybil. I won't be able to live far from them." He put his knees together for So and puckered up to Fusa's nose as the cat made her way to his shoulder over the back of the sofa.

Sybil was slightly hurt, just a little pang. But as a good animal advocate, she was moved by Bob's love for the cats. They adored the chef. And they wouldn't care one bit if he mixed non-vegan products into their food.

"I think we should share custody," she said. "Those who like you more can stay with you. And those who like me more can stay with me. Now please pack your bags and go to a hotel. I want to change the locks. Try to find a good real estate agent. The cats in your custody will need a lot of room."

Bob sobbed, hugging Fusa. The kitten drew away from him to clean with her tongue the tears that blemished her immaculate coat.

"Bob, please, go on up," Sybil insisted. "I need to correct a mistake I committed in the past. I want to repay all the love that a very dear woman gave me." And she dialed the number.

Bob started to drag himself upstairs, slowly, one cat in his arms and three around his feet. Sybil wanted to call Arnold Schwarzenegger. As if the humiliation he had suffered didn't hurt

enough, Bob had to lose his woman to a lez. He slowed down to hear the conversation.

“My dear!” Sybil said to her listener. “I miss you so much! Look, that talk we had changed my life. I’ve just separated from Bob. I want to live in the South, near you. What do you think?”

Bob kept his ears perked. Sybil was vibrant:

“Ah, how nice, my dear! We’ll do so much together there in Weekeewawkeeville! I have so much to learn from you and Diogo. Will you teach me to cook, Megan?”

Surprised, Bob sharpened his ears. Sybil started to speak very softly. He couldn’t hear anything else. But he’d gotten the gist of it. Both sad for losing the company of several feline friends and relieved not to lose that of Sybil to a lesbian, he squatted at the top of the stairs to caress four backs arched in pleasure.

Sybil spied her former companion, hid her mouth with her hand and filled a whisper with pity:

“Yes, Bob is suffering a lot, Megan. The poor guy doesn’t want to separate. He said he wouldn’t be able to live. But we made a fair agreement. He’ll get over it.”



## So

Dr. Stanley's receptionist interprets the event as a mystical experience, a spiritual encounter.

The surgeon is electrified. He hasn't been this enthused with a discovery in decades, three and a half to be exact. The receptionist reinforces, I know you're not a person of faith, but I firmly believe in other worlds and dimensions populated by spirits that can only be contacted by a few special persons endowed with five very sharp senses and an extra one. Dr. Stanley's good-looking face is beaming. He doesn't believe in connections between this world and the one beyond, but he likes being considered special even if for the wrong reasons. He feels good — and who wouldn't? — to enjoy the reputation of having a superior sensibility, even if that fame might be limited to the work environment and not correspond to reality. They'll give you all kinds of behaviorist explanations for what happened, doctor, they'll explain the hows to you, but not the whys; for me you made a connection with the divine and end of story. Dr. Stanley shakes his head in false modesty. Certainties like that of the receptionist sound simplistic, but they exist for good reasons. They soften the rigors of life for people like him, a man who combats skin cancers to earn his daily bread and who kills wild animals to relax. The experience really was exciting and he will try to repeat it on his walk the next day, same time, same clothes, key in hand.

At six in the morning, he walks along the oak-and-magnolia-lined lane visited the day before by the apparition. He laughs inside. It feels nice to relive the experience, borrowing the receptionist's outlook. With no need for drugs, he manages to recover some of the magical impressions he had abandoned along with his childhood. His eyes ransack the crowns of the trees trying to detect the dark shape waiting for him. His hand rises a little and displays the key in his fingers. The object is supposed to attract the spirit and force it to leave behind its refuge on high. The dermatologist's shoes slosh on the doughy ground of leaves soaked by last night's rain.

Before long he hears the winged angel approaching from behind. He feels it swooping by his shoulder and sees it elevate anew to the sky. His heart is that of a child now, and it rattles. He lifts the key in his fingers a little higher and slows his pace.

He stops. The black angel is perching over his head, in the crown of an oak, on a twisted arm of the tree. His heart of a boy jumps in fear. And if the demon were to steal his key, scratch his hand, poke his eyes? The doctor grins, pets the boy's head, resumes his walk.

Like the morning before, the entity's flight, from one branch to another, passing so close to his arm, repeats three times. Like the morning before, the entity is accompanied by another smaller one. It's easy to feel special. You can't help it! Episodes like that don't happen everyday, nor to just anyone. Dr. Stanley is a Chosen One. He has the key and one or more qualities that are unknown to him but that are lacking in his fellow men and that lead winged specters to try to reveal to him a certain mystery.

He arrives at the gate to his yard. The larger specter is hovering in the crown of the sycamore tree there. The smaller one can't be seen, or is decomposed in codes inaccessible even to a Chosen One. The child wants to break free from the doctor's breast, he's afraid of being punished. Relax, my child, says the doctor. And he extends his arm upward, waving the key. But the demon stays put.

Dr. Stanley shields the urchin within him, I'm going to film this thing, if it's a spirit it won't show in the video. He goes in the house and comes back with a camera and a slice of bread. He points the camera up and captures the image of the entity clutching the branch of the sycamore. Didn't I tell you that it was a crow, my child? Or a grackle, I don't know. A common black bird. The boy doesn't listen.

It's not a crow, it's a grackle, the nurse says, and the intern agrees, but the assistant believes that it's not a grackle, but indeed a crow, a pet crow that escaped from its owner and followed the doctor to get food. On the computer screen in the clinic, the bird pecks with difficulty at the breadcrumbs on the grass. He tries to swallow Dr. Stanley's shoelaces. Ha ha ha,

everyone laughs, except the receptionist. Comments abound, it doesn't like bread, weren't there any sunflower seeds? Cut. On top of the breadcrumbs, a saucer with strips of something whitish. Fish, Dr. Stanley informs them. The bird grabs a strip in his beak and rubs it against the grass. The voices mingle, why does it rub the fish on the ground?, it doesn't care for it, it wants to clean it, it wants to bury it.

The receptionist is the only one who says nothing. She doesn't have to, she shouldn't. Her duty is to contemplate, humbly, the miraculous manifestation of a power that is (this she does know) infinitely greater than that of human understanding.

The bird displays his red throat and squawks insistently. The voices collide, it's ravenous, wasn't there any corn? any fruit? nuts? The camera draws back, cut. Out of focus, Dr. Stanley's hand digs in the damp earth. Cut. The bird eats a worm from his dirty hand. Ahh..., laughter, applause. Bird leaves droppings on Dr. Stanley's mailbox. Laughter. Orange cat walks toward Dr. Stanley's yard, bird flies to the roof. Cut. Black spot, almost imperceptible in the highest branch of an oak behind Dr. Stanley's house. Dr. Stanley making a face, his tongue hanging out. Laughter, applause.

It's the end of another day wrapped in human skin and everybody gets ready to go. The receptionist wants a copy of the images of the bird to examine with a friend who's a medium. The surgeon replies that he will be happy to make a copy when he has time and leaves the clinic with the assistant.

"Too bad I couldn't record everything. A small bird accompanied the black bird on a good part of its flight."

"It didn't accompany it, it chased it off," the assistant suggests. "The crow was lost and invading the other's territory."

The assistant must know what he is talking about. He knows a little about ornithology. He's friends with the taxidermist who mounts the birds hunted by the doctor and exhibited in the waiting room.

"The crow, or the grackle..."

"Crow," the assistant assures him.

"...must have mistaken my key for food."

“Or mistaken you for its former provider. Anyway, it’s very vulnerable. Domesticated birds have a hard time surviving if set free.”

“Domesticated birds are stupid.”

“Birds are very smart! Crows, doctor, use pieces of metal and leaves as tools.”

The surgeon returns home on foot. He doesn’t want to scare the crow away with his loud motorcycle. He runs his eyes over the crowns of the trees, but he cannot locate him. He ponders the possibility of building a spacious aviary. He wants to take him in, to protect him from his inability to deal with the good and the bad surprises of life outside the cage. He takes for granted a meeting with him the next day, same time, same place.

The crow does not fail to show. This time, the dermatologist’s fingers offer him pieces of fruit. The bird follows the moving two-legged fruit tree over to the mailbox, where he finally has his repast. The doctor points his camera at him.

Yes, after her appointment Megan would like to see the images of the bird on the clinic’s computer screen. She doesn’t mind getting to the airport a little late. She is fascinated by Dr. Stanley’s story and envies the trust the crow has in him. At the same time she fears for the bird’s safety. Dr. Stanley looks at his watch, he’s spent too much time conversing and now he’s in a rush, I’ll tell the secretary to show you the video, congratulations on the progress in the scarring process, don’t forget sunblock and you can relax and go to Venezuela.

“Brazil,” a hurried Megan corrects, and suggests: “You could ask a wild bird rehabilitation specialist to teach the crow to fend for himself!”

Dr. Stanley doesn’t really understand what she says, he’s already thinking of the surgery he will perform in ten minutes, and he shouts from a distance, If you have any problems call my emergency line.

Megan regrets having taken so long to suggest the intervention of a rehabilitation specialist in a matter that in Dr. Stanley’s view is private. She lacked the timing to effect a

necessary and consequential change. It was her fault that an entire universe within a bird might disappear forever.

"There's nothing you or a rehabilitation specialist can do now," was Diogo's opinion, on their way to the airport. "No one knows where that crow is."

"And what if I left an emergency message for Dr. Stanley? I could suggest that he try to hold the bird until we find a rehab specialist."

"To tell you the truth, I think that the crow is safer on the street than stuck at a hunter's place."

Megan pulsates like a bird being held, her voice cracks:

"There's no way Dr. Stanley would kill that crow... He considers him a pet, not game. He even wants to build an aviary for him."

"He considers him his property. Now forget all that. Before long we'll be flying to Brazil. Think about that."

There's little room in Megan's head for the contradictions and paradoxes of the complex South American country. Desperate attempts to solve the problem of the crow cackle and compete inside her. None of them is viable. She calls Sybil, Mom do you think that, Hello Megan? I can't hear you Bad connection Veterinarian So diarrhea vomiting. Megan hangs up. Diogo is right, there's nothing they can do.

In the morning the doctor walks holding up a slice of papaya in the tips of his fingers. He holds his arm up so long that his shoulder hurts. The sky blows silver lights between the green leaves. Some trees weep yellow leaves. Century-old branches spit wads of Spanish moss. As for the crow, no sign whatsoever.

The dermatologist returns home and resumes his walk, the whole way holding up a gourd of nuts. His shoulders, arms and knees hurt. A tear falls from his dewy forehead. The child emerges in his throat, whimpering, he misses the lost animal. The doctor pats him on the head:

"It's the smaller bird's fault. It thought that it owned the territory and chased off the crow, which I own."

The boy kicks his legs. He demands that the surgeon walk along the oak-and-magnolia-lined lane again the next morning. He says the crow will be there, the doctor will see! He orders him to capture it.

The doctor heeds the boy's orders. The right place for the bird is in his care, far from the dangers of the trees, the power lines, and the asphalt. He thinks of borrowing a crow-call from one of his hunting partners. But he realizes that the device might attract more than one crow, not necessarily his. Birdcalls and other hunting gear are impersonal objects in a world of cheap hunters and common birds. He and his bird are exceptional and have a special interaction.

In the morning the doctor walks along the lane made chilly by the humid night. He holds up a gourd of nuts, seeds and berries. His muscles and joints still ache from yesterday's effort. But he is patient. He is used to the discomfort of lying in wait, when time stops for ducks, deer and moose to settle in the sights of his equipment.

Three-hundred yards from his place, he feels the excitement of a pair of wings touching his shoulder. He sees the black shape of the bird move away and alight on the branch of the sycamore. The boy's heart leaps, shouts, That's him, don't let him get away! The doctor walks to the mailbox and sets the gourd of goodies on top of it. He goes in the house and comes back with the gun he uses to hunt small animals. The crow regales himself on the berries.

The hunter does feel one pang of pity. But there is a rush in his veins. His goal is to give the bird the opportunity to flee and to perform the prodigious feat of shooting him out of the sky without disfiguring him. An operation as difficult as it is valuable! He points his gun at his target and waits. The crow will look good by itself, perpetuated in flight position on a marble stand in the foyer of the clinic. When she passes by, the new-age receptionist will be able to evoke its spirit and say a prayer to all the animals made martyrs during mystical contacts with human beings.

## La

Mizz Orchid was uncomfortable in the maid's uniform that Mrs. Marcela had ordered from a boutique in São Paulo. The lace decorating the collar and sleeves felt scratchy on her neck and arms. The lace on the apron, white and delicate to the point of distraction, seemed to inhibit ingredients and keep utensils at a distance, making the tasks of cooking and serving more difficult. Look how Orchid carries the salad tray, Silvanira said, she looks like a model on the catwalk. Giggles here and there. Mizz Orchid pretended not to hear them. In her Chinese slippers, she moved with care between the dining table and the stove, almost retreating. Her lone comfort, the warmth of the pots and pans.

The other maids already knew how to work unencumbered in their laced uniforms, which had been introduced into the manor house by Mrs. Marcela with her concept of the art of entertaining guests. Those maids had also learned to stand all day in Chinese slippers despite painful heels. Mrs. Marcela had made wearing uniform and slippers obligatory. Besides being cheap, adding very little to what the maids owed their employers, the Chinese footwear spared guests having to see those wide backcountry toes, a grotesquerie of fly larvae and mud-painted toenails.

Even if she were dressed in her customary cotton skirt, advertising T-shirt and flip-flops, Mizz Orchid would feel uncomfortable in the manor house kitchen. Her colleagues had heard that she was getting twice their normal pay to prepare just vegetables, and they protested under their breaths. They spoke ill of the lavender cologne she put on her kerchief to counter the smell of meats. They said that her fear of the vegetables touching the meats got in the way of their work. They mixed forks sullied by egg whites with the cutlery she had set aside to use. The she-said-she-said sizzled in the frying pan, gushed from the faucet, She's spoiled, she thinks she's better than us, She don't eat ham not to hurt her daughter-in-law, and her son does Mortandela. Mizz Orchid made believe they were making fun of someone else. She grumbled, If you're envious go ask Mrs. Marcela for a

raise, you bums. But she hoped no one had heard, first because bad behavior embarrassed her and, second, not to give ideas on a silver platter to the undeserving.

That slippery character Silvanira was avoiding her, which demonstrated guilt. She was the only person Mizz Orchid had told the secret to. Couldn't you trust a religious girl, an Adventist? Mizz Orchid concluded that you couldn't. Lips that pray also gossip. Vegetarian and employed by the Bezerra Leitão family since she was just six, Silvanira likely started the rebellion, the nastiness, because she thought she had more right than Mizz Orchid to cook just vegetables for twice the pay.

In those rare moments in the kitchen when they could rest simultaneously, the maids sometimes set their intra-class conflicts aside and came together to feel compassion for an unhappy soul of the bosses' class: Megan. Thus Silvanira, Mizz Orchid, and the others gathered in the hall that led to the dining room to take a peek at the girlfriend of the birthday boy at the table.

"Look how pasty."

"But pretty, a porcelain doll."

"Cute as an embroidered ribbon."

"A decoration to put in the breakfront and not touch or it might break."

"So weak. Can't do this or that."

"Can't stand the sun, drink milk, eat meat."

"Last night she turned down a piece of cake just cuz there was eggs in the recipe."

"This morning she said no to butter and ate bread with tomato."

"Poor thing."

"She can't eat almost nothing..."

"She's sick."

"She had cancer."

Mrs. Marcela did not like seeing the maids at rest. Together like that, whispering gossip, they got on her nerves.



They had no business wasting time with idle chatter, work's never done in the home, look and you will find. Mrs. Marcela rang the little silver bell. The maids returned to the kitchen, in a line, without a peep.

Megan could tell that the maids were talking about her. She found them fun. She planned to get to know better the one who, according to Vanessa, had been vegan since she was a girl and had the name of a flower, Orchid. She wanted to share the daily life of that extraordinary South American peasant who had no formal education but was faithful, Megan presumed, to her animal consciousness. Mizz Orchid was probably a rare *DaVincian*, a vegan since childhood, as legend has it that Leonardo Da Vinci had been. The prospect of that friendship was more stimulating for Megan than staying with Diogo's relatives. Sure, they must have their good qualities, like Sybil had said when she gave advice about being tolerant. But Megan only had a week to learn something about that feudal world she had entered and she had no intention of wasting time with the slave-owners. She knew the basic bla-bla-bla protocol in Portuguese — please thank you excuse me — to deal with the Bezerra Leitão family. With Mizz Orchid she was more loquacious. Thanks a lot Mizz Orchid, she smiled, every time the servant, after hearing the little bell, appeared with a full plate. Very tasty Mizz Orchid, she said widening her smile, when the woman with the name of a flower would take her empty plate away.

Practically the entire compulsory family nucleus was seated at the table, plus the priest. Father Cristiano, Bezerra Leitão, Mrs. Marcela, their sons Tiago and Rodrigo, and Mrs. Marcela's sister-in-law with her two daughters sat around the domain of meats, eggs, and dairy products. Megan and the birthday boy sat at one end where Mizz Orchid, alert to the little bell, presented her variations in rice, beans, corn and tomatoes: corn on the cob, rice balls; bean soup with rice and corn; sliced tomatoes; baked tomatoes, filled with rice and corn, and a side of corn and tomato risotto; corn with tomato sauce, with a side of white rice. Mizz Orchid had thought up and perpetrated these goodies pretty much on her own. She'd had a little orientation from Mrs. Marcela: make what you know how, but with a touch of chic. The hostess was used to relegating vegetables to the

status of side dishes you could do without, and she preferred occupying herself with the preparation of meats, which she regarded as relevant; with tablecloths, china, silverware; the pictures, the curtains and the rugs; with the flush of the grass in the yard.

When she was just seventeen Marcela Gallo Sardinha had married Afonso Bezerra Leitão, who was thirty-two. From this union were born an empire bound together by cattle and pig farms, as well as human offspring: five male specimens. The farms were in four different states, and they had the same names as them, switched around. The Fazenda São Paulo was in the state of Mato Grosso, the Fazenda Mato Grosso was in the state of São Paulo, the Fazenda Goiás was in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, and the Fazenda Mato Grosso do Sul was in the state of Goiás. Of the five sons, one died. The oldest never left his mother's side. Another went to live in Rio. The late twins took flight abroad: Diogo was studying in the USA and Diego was hanging out in Italy. Four pregnancies, days on end in front of the TV, and a soft spot for cheese-and-guava-paste roly-poly tripled her size, but the lines of Mrs. Marcela's face did not change, they were still as in the wedding photos, sharp lines above and soft below, heavy eyebrows over her eagle eyes, and a chin like a baby's elbow, with dimples. Her mouth, a short gap without much flesh.

Mrs. Marcela would have preferred to give a big party, a week with hundreds of guests, with a Mass by Father Cristiano in the farm's chapel, diversions for adults, games for the little kids, a stage-band ball for the rich and a folk trio for the poor, and a series of barbecues with animals slaughtered for the special occasion. Maybe this time her efforts as hostess would merit kudos in the press, on the society page. Maybe her brilliance could counter the animosity toward her husband on the part of the owner of the local newspaper, *O Correio Perobinha-campense*, giving her due on the page dedicated to celebrities in the area. But Diogo asked her not to kill animals, not to serve meat. A party without meat?, Mrs. Marcela had shouted on the telephone, and what shall I offer the guests?!, rice and tomato salad? Mother and son ended up negotiating a dinner *en petit comité*, just family, with ample meats for the omnivores, respecting the ideal

of family harmony. The matron was determined to give her fellow diners the attention that royal European families would get. In her opinion the event was bound to be anemic and opaque; to give it a little spice she went for fancy clothes, a *tailleur* of red silk with collar and cuff of mink.

Mrs. Marcela's sister-in-law, a vivacious plump woman named Antonia, had taken a little time off from her editing of a men's mag published in the capital city, just to go to the farm to meet the vegan gringa who had turned the head of her godson. Give those models Brazilian bikini wax treatments, she had recommended to her team before leaving. In the last issue there were so many little black dots that it looked like Georges Seurat had painted those pussies. Slim and graceful in her youth, and sympathetic to some ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, she now tried to lead life harmonizing conflicting aspirations and feelings: her feminist ideal of independence and her patriarchal shame of having no husband. Between extended marriages and brief ones, informal and on paper, she had had six. With the ravages of time, the advent of obesity, and the drain of divorces on her fortune, no man had come forward to be number seven.

"I had six husbands," she always found a way to tell those around her, just to enjoy their surprise, admiration or astonishment. And making a face, she would conclude: "I declare, with first-hand knowledge, that all men want in marriage is to freeload."

Not one man would ever freeload on her daughters Vanessa and Patricia, much less six, she promised. And she stuffed the girls with food. She turned Patricia into a rotund and greasy adolescent. But Vanessa seemed to have a special metabolism or a slender gene; people said she ate like a horse and had the body of a model.

"Six husbands!" Antonia poured out her heart to Megan, with hidden pride, her eyes looking around for expressions of astonishment. And muttering: "Six husbands, six problems."

The little gap that constituted a mouth in Mrs. Marcela's youthful face was reproduced in the firstborn, Tiago, tall and skinny forty-something, with afflicted, fleeting eyes. Tiago spent his childhood on the farm to learn to run the family business and

even enrolled in agronomy school to please his folks. But the contact with dung gave him asthma; bugs, allergies. Horses kicked him, cows got him with their horns. Barns, corrals and stables made him sick or bored; the confinement and transport of animals pained him. Auctions confused him and politicians scared him. As soon as the adolescent became an adult and possibilities became certainties, Bezerra Leitão and wife were forced to admit that Tiago did not have the vocation they dreamed of, if he had any at all, and they changed the object of their hopes. Tiago couldn't stand having disappointed his parents. He broke into pieces. When he pulled himself back together, he was a man of ideas. He scribbled poems, but not enough to make a book. He established himself as an unpublished poet.

"Mother, the *farofa* is cold," he said timidly, napkin to his lips.

Mrs. Marcela rang the little bell. Silvanira sprouted from the kitchen and took the *farofa* back, with orders to heat it up in the wood-fired oven.

In the authority of the bell, the swiftness of his mother, and the humility of the servant, the firstborn saw signs of his own power in the domestic realm. He found the courage to criticize his brother:

"In your shoes, Diogo, I wouldn't waste any time studying forestry. I wouldn't waste time in any university. I wouldn't waste time on the future because there is no future. The biosphere of the planet is condemned. Halfway through this century there won't be any Amazon rain forest, Arctic ice, or fish in the sea, to cite three examples."

"It's true," Vanessa said with her mouth full while Diogo translated for Megan what Tiago had said. "Fighting for a better world is banging your head against a wall, wasting energy for no reason. That's why I gave up on my career as a model." And she added another pork chop to the mound of country rice rising on her plate.

"The best way to save energy is to sit still," went on Tiago to Diogo. "If you really want to save forests, begin by boycotting books and notebooks."

Rodrigo, a year younger than Tiago, joined the conversation:

“In that regard, Tiago, the environment owes you a lot. You’re a poet who never published a book.”

Tiago tightened his grip on the napkin with his long trembling fingers:

“It owes even more to you, Rodrigo, a filmmaker who never managed to make a film. Since the quantity of material involved in a modest movie production is greater than that of publishing a small book, you save more natural resources than me.”

Bursts of curt laughter. Dependent on Diogo’s translation, Megan reacted a little late. Mrs. Marcela reminded her sons that the dinner table is no place to exchange words. Vanessa said she would be right back and excused herself, under the circumspect eye of Father Cristiano.

“I won’t be an environmentalist forever,” said Rodrigo ironically, his anxious eyes turned toward his father. “It’s only a matter of time for me to get financing and get my film rolling. My meeting with that producer from Rio is scheduled for next week.”

“And it will be cancelled right before it’s supposed to start, for the fifth time,” the firstborn sneered.

Rodrigo ignored the comment, eyes stuck on Bezerra Leitão:

“The producer will not have the heart to turn me down for financing, Dad. He owes you. He shot a lot of footage of rodeo here on the ranch for that soap opera, and didn’t pay a cent.”

Bezerra Leitão averted his eyes from his son. He wasn’t interested in projects that didn’t perpetuate the pig and cattle traditions of the family. He’d always made it perfectly clear: if you want to invest in something else, you come up with your own money. Also he didn’t want to look into Rodrigo’s eyes without having looked into Tiago’s. Aged by decades of scarce ideas, lame structures and aborted initiatives, the projects of the older sons had been reduced to their essence, a verbal spat between brothers. The patriarch would sooner die barren than give the

impression of taking sides in that dispute between frustrated artists. He'd prefer to turn over all his farms to a daughter, if he had had one, rather than leave a single acre in the hands of those two weaklings, one bachelor and the other sterile. He had a secret hope in relation to Diogo. While interested in art and fun, the kid had taken the trouble to get a scholarship to study in a school of forestry. That was a sign of a hankering to do something useful with land, plants, animals, Bezerra Leitão guaranteed his wife, Mrs. Marcela. And the kid also showed signs of having a taste for women. A taste given to mystery and the weird, to judge by his new girlfriend, he noted. But taste in any case.

Vanessa came back to the dining room. She looked tired. Her face was a lunar lividness, perforated by deep and oily eyes, and streaked by long, damp hairs. She got high, Diogo whispered to Megan. The beauty sat down before her monument to abundance, erected in country rice and pork chops, and proceeded to demolish it with knife and fork.

"You need to eat more meat, you're anemic," Antonia told her, adding a rare filet to her plate.

The discrete pupils of Father Cristiano sought, in vain, any sign of anemia in Vanessa's bust. The man of the cloth ran his tongue lightly along his lips and dried them with a napkin. For the first time since he had thanked the All-Powerful for the abundant feast, he opened them for something other than bread and wine:

"And Diego, Marcela, any news?"

Mrs. Marcela got a little flustered:

"He sent a letter with some pictures." She rang the bell, prompting a maid to emerge. "Deuzicreide, bring the envelope that's on my bedside table."

Bezerra Leitão got up and left the room without excusing himself. He dragged one leg, product of a partial paralysis of the body that the doctor attributed to his having ingested undercooked pork. On the veranda, from where he could see his fellow diners, the patriarch lit a cigarette and cleared his throat loudly as if to let them all know where he was. He did not like to talk about Diego, Diogo's twin. And Diego wanted nothing to do

with his father, Brazil or much less farms. He had opted to try a career in fashion design in Italy. Last time he called his mother, he said that he had a business partner, an old baron in Milan. The two had just set up a shop in Thailand to make toy stuffed animals.

Deuzicreide handed Marcela the correspondence sent by Diego. The photos were passed around. Diego and the baron watch a men's fashion show. Diego and the baron pet toy stuffed animals. Diego, the baron and several shirtless guys wearing animal costumes party on a float painted with the colors of the rainbow.

"My son finally got it right in Italy," Mrs. Marcela explained. "He says the little animals of synthetic material that he makes with his partner the baron are doing well in Europe because they're really cute and they imitate the perfection of real hides and feathers." She chose a photo and rang the bell. "Deuzicreide, put this one on the refrigerator door next to Father Cristiano shaking the Pope's hand."

Father Cristiano concentrated on removing a piece of parsley from his sausage.

After they had seen the pics and finished talking about Diego, Bezerra Leitão tossed his cigarette in the fish tank and returned to the dining room. He announced his arrival with a badly calculated clearing of the throat, which set off an awful cough with whistling adornments. Mrs. Marcela came to his rescue with a glass of water and firm pats on the back. The banquet was at that stage when the over-stuffed participants have nothing to do but have just a little more of something while they wait for the hostess to realize that the only thing keeping them in their seats is the prospect of dessert. Vanessa wiped her plate with a slice of bread and stuffed it in her mouth.

"I can hardly wait to try that vegan cake," she said to Diogo.

He was humored:

"The first cake with tofu icing in the history of Fazenda Mato Grosso."

Antonia observed him translate the phrase for Megan and exchange a laughter of accomplices with her that sounded like the chirping of baby chicks. She felt a little uneasy. She couldn't say exactly why but she knew the cure: more to eat. She had another serving of *feijoada*. She still hadn't had the chance to talk Godmother to Godson about his new existential phase, Diogo's conversion to a belief that she interpreted as a kind of fundamentalist vegetarianism. She'd like to communicate to him, for his own good, that she was a little disappointed to see him submit, apparently to impress his girlfriend, to one of those faddish diets from America dictated by the marketing of companies whose only interest is maximum profit, taking advantage of the arrogance of consumers convinced of the superiority of their lifestyle and moral values.

"You're not the same person, Diogo," she began. "From hard-core carnivore to vegan! Tell me how that happened. The things people do for love..."

Diogo felt the silence of the napkins. Over the tops of wine glasses, all eyes were fixed on his face. He smiled:

"Someone who had six husbands ought to know better than me what someone does for love."

Chuckles tinkling along with the glasses. Antonia looked around, filled with pride. Diogo had a sip of water. He had avoided the trap set by his godmother. You don't talk about veganism during a meat-eaters' meal, Megan had told him on the flight down, passing on Sybil's lesson. A meat-eater's table is a battlefield covered with the remains of the individuals that we vegans try to defend. At the table of a meat-eater, the battle, for us, is already lost.

"Six hubbies, six freeloaders," said Antonia, purging, through a wrinkle in her forehead, her satisfaction with the memory of the past. Then she tried attacking on a different flank. "Tell me something, Diogo. And plants? You don't want to kill animals, but you must kill plants not to starve. Isn't that contradictory?"



All the heads at the table nodded like flowers in the breeze, Right, and the plants?, Antonia knew how to make up questions, she's done interviews, she publishes a magazine.

Diogo translated his godmother's words for Megan. Megan turned toward her a smile of sugar cubes and said in her own language:

"Oh, I'm glad that you're so interested in the subject of abolition of animal exploitation, Antonia. We'll give you a book about it. You can also read the Frequently Asked Questions at an animal rights website."

The flowers turned toward Antonia. Book, website, no one needed to be a Ph.D in English to understand what the American had said. Antonia felt the expectations of all the looks. She dug in:

"I don't want to read a book or the FAQs at some website. I just want to know this: how about plants, Diogo?"

Megan squeezed her boyfriend's hand under the table. *Plantas*, plants. That question about plants, how boring. The most common objection to the animal rights approach. Paradoxically, the one that made the misinformed critics of the cause feel smarter. As soon as someone said she or he was vegetarian, or vegan, some antagonist, with no real concern for the vegetable world, would ask the question, And the plants?, why not save them too? Megan squeezed Diogo's hand again. For him not to give in to the provocation. For the moment, the tactic was to maintain the peace.

"I should not like to discuss the consumption of animals at the table," he got out of it. "It takes away my appetite."

Antonia had seconds of filet mignon and served some blood sausage to Patricia. Bezerra Leitão had more steak. Vanessa remembered that she had to vomit again and excused herself. She headed toward the bathroom, Father Cristiano's eyelids rolling out on the floor for the passing of her lovely feet.

Mrs. Marcela gnawed on a chicken wing to hide her irritation. That's what happened when you invited your journalist sister-in-law to receptions. Antonia was a necessary part of that event, not just because she was the birthday boy's godmother but

also because she had been married to, and was still on good terms with, the owner of the newspaper Mrs. Marcela would like to appear in. But she was restive, given to polemics, and she intended to turn into a debate the event that the hostess had envisioned as a pleasant and elegant communion of family members, blessed by the presence of the priest. Mrs. Marcela thought about serving the cake to quell that irksome discussion with a good happy-birthday-to-you. She feared, nevertheless, she might commit a gaffe. If she were to serve dessert too early, she might be giving the impression that she was asking guests to leave.

Tiago, the firstborn, touched his lips with his napkin. He stamped his kiss of red wine on the embroidered insignia.

"Aunt Antonia didn't ask about the consumption of animals, Diogo, but rather about the consumption of plants," he observed.

"Tiago's right," said Rodrigo, to Bezerra Leitão's surprise. The patriarch had never seen the two elder sons agree on anything. "No reason you can't explain why you shouldn't spare plants."

Megan needed no translation. *Plantas*. Plants. Why not spare plants too?, reverberated the infernal question.

"Excuse me please," she said, leaving the dining room. Diogo could fend for himself.

Back in their room, she left an emergency message for her surgeon, Good evening Dr. Stanley, I'm calling from Brazil, I'm curious about the crow that followed you on your walks, Did he ever show up again, or not?, All else is well, If you can call me the number is etc., Thanks. She hung up. She regretted it. It was foolish to think that the doctor would call her back just to talk about a crow. She should have made up a story about finding another suspicious growth and wanting to know what arrangements she should make. Dr. Stanley would return her call right away. She would say, It's not really a growth, but a pimple, which I popped myself, But tell me about that crow.

On her way back to the dining room, she heard someone throwing up in the bathroom. She thought of offering to help. The

bathroom door opened and out slipped a diaphanous Vanessa, her nose damp, her hair sweaty, a faintly pallid smile. Megan smiled back. The curves of the beauty undulated daintily back to the table.

Megan dawdled a little looking at old photographs of the Bezerra Leitão family on the wall in the hall. She was afraid to see Diogo squirming in the net cast by Antonia. For the activist, it was not very likely that the group in the dining room was actually interested in becoming informed about animal rights. Meat-eater humans are closeted vegans, she had once told Diogo, mentioning a book by the ecofeminist Carol J. Adams (and losing a point in the notepad, accused of “pamphletarian” rhetoric). Trained since childhood to repress their aversion to meat and to close their eyes to the oppression of animals, closeted vegans are tormented by their inner conflict and angrily turn on those who have come out. The fight with vegans distracts the closeted ones from their own blockage, Megan had explained (and Diogo had closed the notepad to hide the urge to fight with her). If Diogo were to respond to the question about plants, he would be attacked with a barrage of new objections. Humans need meat for protein. Humans need to solve human problems first. Humans have the power of reason. Humans received the right of dominion over other creatures from God. Those and other objections had already been more than contested in books and on websites accessible to anyone who was interested. If anybody wanted to know about them, they could go check them out! Diogo should not set himself up to be attacked by closeted folk. He should not distract them from their blockages over the remains of the victims of a lost battle.

If Megan’s departure from the dining room had allowed her to reflect and to reaffirm her strategic guidelines, it had left Diogo freer to decide for himself how to deal with the interrogation about plants. He filled his mouth with tomato and chewed slowly.

“So, my son, how about plants? Answer about plants!” spoke the impatient patriarch.

Diogo pointed to his own mouth and signaled for Bezerra Leitão to hold on a minute. Mrs. Marcela intervened:

“Let him swallow, Bezerra. It’s bad manners to speak with your mouth full.”

Diogo kept on chewing. Those who are in the closet can always come out, he mused. For many the decisive step only depends on a little information. Not at the table, Megan instructed, not while the bodies of friends are being ingested. Or not? It was less likely that Diogo’s relatives would read a book or go to a website about the subject than that they would pay attention to some explanation that he could give right then and there, between the last bite of tomato and the first of dessert. He took a deep breath, organized a modest text easy to digest and made up his mind to deliver it before Megan came back to the dining room.

“I think the best way to respond to the question about plants is to summarize the theory of animal rights,” he began.

He looked at his auditorium, a place cold with blank stares and napkins pressed on lips. He moved forward:

“My summary is really quite simple, just to give an idea in large brushstrokes of the thinking. It’s based on the ideas of the philosopher Tom Regan and the lawyer Gary Francione.”

“Is this Tom Regan related to that American president who had Alzheimer’s?” the hostess asked, certain she was giving life to a conversation that, in her estimation, was waning.

“I don’t know, mother. One is Regan, with no a. The other is Reagan, with an a.”

“Let Diogo explain that philosophy, Marcela,” the patriarch growled.

Diogo caught his breath and continued:

“So, it’s like this. First I want to make it clear than no one should trample a right, OK? No one should violate human rights or animal rights, even if doing it might be very advantageous for many individuals. So... let’s see. Tom Regan says the following. Just as humans, many animals, many many many animals, have complex consciousness, a psychophysical identity, emotions and social life. Those animals are somebodies, not things. Therefore, they have intrinsic value. So, like humans, they have the right to life, to liberty, and to physical integrity.”

The cold and quiet place in the blank, napkin-like stares. The impertinence of the silverware clinking on the porcelain. Diogo shifted in his seat. He continued:

“The thinking of the lawyer Gary Francione is a little different. He thinks that no one has to have complex consciousness to have rights. It’s enough to be sentient, meaning it’s enough to be capable of feeling pain, pleasure, etc... it’s enough to be aware of one’s own sensations. In other words, it’s enough to be self-aware. Whoever is sentient, whether people or animal, has inherent value and therefore a basic right not to be treated as others’ property. Francione is an abolitionist. He is for the end of exploitation of all sentient animals, just as the abolitionists wanted an end to human slavery. And to achieve abolition of animal exploitation, people have to, before anything else, be vegans.”

Patricia squealed:

“I prefer that philosophy! It seems to be simpler!”

Mrs. Marcela deconstructed:

“I think the lawyer tried to make it simpler so that animals could understand it too, no?”

And she gathered the chuckles all around her, delight spilling from the gap over her child-like chin. Her hostess sensibility indicated that it was time to get the table ready for the birthday cake. Her chubby fingers shook the bell.

The voice of Bezerra Leitão emerged from the generalized laughter like a dolphin from shining waters:

“If this animal rights business catches on, before long donkeys will be getting degrees and stealing jobs from a bunch of lawyers out there!”

And it splashed back in.

“Speaking of that, I remembered a joke,” said Rodrigo. “The delivery boy is speeding down the street on his motorcycle to deliver a pizza, he doesn’t see a pigeon and bam! He runs over the poor thing. He feels so sorry for the pigeon that he forgets about the pizza and takes the critter to the vet, who gives it a sedative, treats it, and says to the pizza boy, She’ll need to remain

in repose. The pizza guy buys a little cage, puts the pigeon in, puts the cage in his room with clean water and a little dry bread, and goes to explain to his boss what happened. The pigeon wakes up, looks around, sees the bars of the cage, the bread, the water, puts its wings on its head and coos: Fuck! I killed the pizza boy!”

Between peals of hilarity, Mrs. Marcela scolded Rodrigo, Don't use bad words, my son. Patricia's voice erupted:

“I have a plant joke. But it's sort of dirty. Can I tell it, Aunt Marcela?”

They all looked at the priest.

“What do you think, Father Cristiano, can Patricia tell the joke?” consulted Mrs. Marcela.

The cleric thought about it quickly, Nothing happens by chance, God must have bestowed on Vanessa's fat and ugly sister some talent, maybe that of telling jokes, to show His infinite mercy.

“If it's not too dirty, a well-told little joke always serves as an expression of divine inspiration,” he consented.

Mrs. Marcela peeked at the empty hall. No maid had heeded her call. She shook the bell more vigorously. Patricia's cheeks moved like ignited devil rays:

“This lady's garden is doing well, but the tomatoes don't turn red. So she asks her neighbor for some advice. The neighbor says she knows a fix to make tomatoes red that never fails. Look, the neighbor says, tonight at midnight, you go to the garden and take off all your clothes in front of the tomatoes; they will be embarrassed and will turn red. The lady thinks this is a little weird, but she decides to try it anyway. In the morning, the neighbor comes to the fence and calls the lady over, And so, did the fix work? The lady answers, More or less, the tomatoes didn't turn red, but the cucumbers grew five inches!”

Father Cristiano smiled and rested his eyes on his plate as if ridding himself of two olive pits.

Back in the dining room, Megan was caught in the web of laughter. Diogo told her quietly that Brazilians joke about everything, It was no sweat, honey, I summarized the theory for

them and no one attacked me, I have the impression that what I said went in one ear and came out the other, but no big deal, something always sticks, I planted a seed, Only time will tell if it blossoms. Megan thought that was great, All the better that they didn't attack you, honey, People are unpredictable, I've just seen that at the table of Brazilians, who always joke around, the in/out of the closet system has its own dynamic. She mocked Diogo, Remember when it was you who scored points against my preaching in that notepad? The pair giggled tee hee hee. Megan felt like learning Portuguese to tell the joke about the vegans changing a light bulb. I'll tell it, said Diogo.

"How many vegans does it take to change a light bulb?"

Silence. No one was interested in vegan jokes.

"How many?" bounced Patricia's helpful cheeks.

"Two. One to change the bulb and one to check to see if it has any animal ingredient."

Patricia was the only one to find it comical:

"I think you and Megan have every reason to be vegans, Diogo. I'm not sure I understand your explanation of animal rights, but it must be spot on." She turned to Antonia. "Mom, I want to be vegan too."

Antonia stuck her fork into a sausage:

"You can be vegan after you reach legal age, if you haven't changed your mind. In the meantime your health is my responsibility. Now eat your sausage or no cake for you."

Patricia took a satisfying bite of the peppery cylinder, made of pig blood and tripe. Vanessa bit into another. Father Cristiano garnished the sausage in Vanessa's mouth with the black olives of his eyes.

Antonia did not let the humorous Brazilian verve dilute the debate:

"I'm not convinced that plants are not capable of feeling pain and aren't self-aware, Diogo."

Mrs. Marcela mewed her distress:

"Please, Antonia, Diogo, everybody. Let's forget this argument about plants. Let's continue to laugh and have fun in a light and welcoming atmosphere." She hollered furiously toward the kitchen: "Is anyone going to come clear the table or will Bezerra and I have to come in there?" Softly, she apologized to the diners. "Some people only obey if you shout."

"Enough of this plant talk, honey," Megan asked Diogo. But the response to Antonia was already rolling off his tongue, transposed from books, websites and discussions with his girlfriend:

"Plants have no brains or nervous system. They don't feel pain. It has not been shown, to this day, that they are sentient."

"But just because something hasn't been proven it doesn't mean that it won't be, someday," said Tiago.

"If it's shown that plants are sentient, that won't change the fact that we know that animals are, and that we should respect their right not be used. The question of plants diverts attention from what really matters."

Bezerra Leitão was offended:

"No one here is trying to divert attention."

"Diogo underestimates our honesty," said Rodrigo.

"And our intelligence," said Tiago.

"He's complicating the explanation on purpose," said Antonia.

Vanessa's doe eyes clouded:

"I bet he thinks we're a bunch of criminals just because we like a little beef."

The priest thought it his duty to reconcile the antagonists:

"Animal, plant, it's the same. The Lord gave mankind dominion over all things."

And he fervently partook of a tomato with bacon.

Diogo repressed his impulse to criticize the religious fallacy of human supremacy. Megan said to him out loud in English, for all to hear, and with a sparkling smile in her blade-like eyes, Please, honey, let's change the subject, ask Tiago to



declaim some of his poems, and Rodrigo to tell us the plot of his film. But Diogo was stubborn. Since he had come this far with the blessed question of plants, why not end the debate with just one more little clarification?

“The raising and slaughter of billions of animals every year are among the practices that most destroy nature. For the sake of animals, humans and plants themselves it is better for us to eat only plants,” he concluded.

Rodrigo’s hesitating eyes brushed on his father’s face. Bezerra Leitão was chewing on a toothpick and looking at the wall. Rodrigo risked:

“Maybe you’ve got good reasons, Diogo.” He peered at the patriarch’s reaction again. Bezerra Leitão, eyes on the wall, broke the toothpick. Rodrigo rethought his point of view: “And so what if you’ve got good reasons? When it comes to eating habits, people are not reasonable.”

“Rodrigo said it well,” Tiago conceded, stretching out his fork-like fingers on the tablecloth. “Another person who addressed the issue with wisdom was the great writer Machado de Assis. He said that, guided by reason, he was inclined to be a vegetarian, but he acknowledged that he was a vegetarian only in principle, and that he was an incurable carnivore in practice. For him, God is vegetarian, but man cannot escape from being a carnivore.”

“So I agree with the writers Machado de Assis and my brother Tiago,” a flattering Rodrigo backed him up. “People will never stop eating meat.”

“Yes, they will,” sparked Patricia with polemics and pepper. “If Diogo, who was a relentless meat-eater, became a vegan, anyone can.”

“What Diogo became was a bore!” honked Antonia. “The politically correct crowd brainwashed him up there in the United States.”

Diogo tried to look calm. Blocked vegans, he repeated to himself. They are the problem, not me. They are afraid to change, not me. I’m a threat to their pathetic certainty.

There were slingshots of objections:

“Crops also destroy the environment.”

“If all the animals are let loose, there won’t be any room for people.”

“Animals don’t have souls.”

“Animals also kill animals.”

“Animals don’t respect human rights.”

Antonia sneered:

“If Diogo lived in the Middle Ages he would defend the right of rats to spread the plague!”

Rodrigo roared:

“In his opinion, we *are* the plague!”

“If it were up to him, we’d all go to jail,” pouted Vanessa.

Mrs. Marcela lamented the tempest of arguments that lashed against her ambiance of crystal and porcelain. She felt that she had failed as a hostess. It would be *bon ton* for the conversation to remain pleasant at all moments, but it hadn’t been that way. Agreement among the diners had not reigned, as good etiquette demanded. What could Father Cristiano be thinking of the hostess? What would Antonia say to other members of the family, friends and, most importantly, to the owner of the local newspaper? What would Diogo’s girlfriend say up there in the United States? Mrs. Marcela felt the cushion of her shoulder in search of comfort. She wasn’t even capable of making a maid clear the table.

A figure in the passageway to the kitchen attracted her eyes full of tears. She widened them:

“What’s that? Have you lost your mind, creature?”

At the entrance to the hall was standing Mizz Orchid in her advertising T-shirt, cotton skirt and flip-flops. In her hands, her folded uniform and Chinese slippers.

“I don’t wanna cook for you no more, Mrs. Marcela. I’m here for us to settle.”

Mrs. Marcela gazed at Antonia and fixed her eyes on Mizz Orchid’s toes. She had to spare her guests from seeing those horrors, five roots spreading sideways on each paw — ten

tapeworms, those toes, blind and deaf monsters charging toward the diners. An expeditious Mrs. Marcela got up from her chair, We need to talk. She drove Mizz Orchid toward a room full of books that Tiago treated as his library.

"Bezerra, entertain the guests, I'll be right back," she barked to her husband and marched after the maid.

Bezerra Leitão didn't like his wife telling him what to do in front of others. He wouldn't entertain any guest. Besides, there were no real guests there, just members of the family and a priest, plus the little American girl. He stuck a pig's ear in his mouth and gravely worked his teeth on it.

"Your feet, creature, at least put the Chinese slippers on!" Mrs. Marcela ordered.

Mizz Orchid obeyed and said:

"The other girls are pickin' on me cuz I'm earnin' double just to cook plants. They done told me to tell you, madame, that they ain't workin'. And that they wanna earn more than me cuz their work is harder."

If it were up to Mrs. Marcela, she'd ask those maids who the hell they thought they were and tell them to be on their ways. But it was her son's birthday and there was a commemoration going on and it had to conclude that evening, preferably with a cake. And there were six more days of guests ahead and considerable work to be done. If Mrs. Marcela were suddenly to be without the maids, lordhelpme. She could just imagine Antonia gossiping, There's such a lack of respect for Marcela in that house that the maids went on strike and one of them had the gall to ask to settle in front of the guests.

"Well, put your uniform back on and go back to the kitchen. Explain to them that your uniform was from a boutique, that it was more expensive. Tell them that at the end of the day, when you pay me everything that you owe me, you will end up earning the same as them."

Mizz Orchid didn't like discovering that she was being taken advantage of even more than she normally was. She didn't have the courage to complain. But she did manage to defy Mrs. Marcela's eagle eyes with her own:

“You go, madame, you’re the boss, you explain.”

Mrs. Marcela’s haughty eyelids trembled. She could put all the maids in their place if she spoke to each one individually. But she was afraid to face them as a group, during a mutiny, and even more so in the kitchen with all those knives around.

“Hold on a minute, Orchid. I will call on Vanessa to solve your problem.”

Seeing her aunt’s signal, Vanessa got up from the table where they were speaking about the campaign to spay and neuter dogs and cats organized each year by Father Cristiano in the town of Perobinha do Campo, which interested Diogo and Megan. Mrs. Marcela led the beauty to the library, brought her up to speed and handed over the duty under the weight of her eyebrows:

“It was you who came up with the idea to pay Orchid double. Now go into the kitchen, stop the rebellion, and tell one of those lazy bums to serve that damn cake before it goes bad. Get going!”

Vanessa was taken aback by her aunt’s look-of-an-eagle circling around the maid’s fright-of-an-owl. She thought that the best way to resolve the situation quickly would be to pay all of them double that week:

“I’ll pay from my own pocket, Aunt Marcela. I don’t want you to have extra expenses; it’s my fault.”

The maid dug up a feeble voice:

“You can pay ’em all double, Vanessa, that sure would be good. But you still gotta pay me a lil’ more. My uniform’s from a boutique and costs more.”

Vanessa did not understand, boutique? That the employees of the Bezerra Leitão family should incur a debt with the employers for utilizing the work tools, she found perfectly fair. For were not those brutish paws a kind of touch of Midas in reverse, as her uncle had said? They made all that was metal rust before it should, they broke all that was wood, they tore all that was fabric. They made all that was flesh bleed before its time. No one could imagine the loss that Bezerra Leitão would suffer if he had to cover all the damages himself. The loss was so large, the

patriarch had assured her, that the majority of the employees would have to work the rest of their lives on the farm without paying off all their debts. But they were used to servitude. They belonged to a long line of vassals. They did not have the genes for independence or dignity. Just as the long lines of poultry in cages and livestock in pens don't have the gene for the will to be free, he believed. Vanessa observed Mizz Orchid's calloused hand scratch the areas of her skin irritated by the lace. Passing on the cost of wear and tear of work tools to the employees was one thing. But from there to splurging at a boutique instead of buying a similar item in a more economical establishment, that was a different story. Making Mizz Orchid pay for a luxury item was almost exploiting, so to speak, a person who was in no condition to find a better job. For the first time in her life, Vanessa was ashamed to be the niece of Mrs. Marcela. She had already said that she would pay all the maids double for the week and she would keep her word. But she would demand that Mrs. Marcela calculate how much more the uniform worn by Mizz Orchid cost than a normal maid's uniform, and that she alone be responsible for paying the difference.

Mrs. Marcela would not accept the money offered by her niece, no way. Formerly a model in advertising in the town of Perobinha do Campo, Vanessa had posed for two years for the catalogues of a clothing store and an auto dealership, until her early retirement on the Bezerra Leitão farm. Her only income was an allowance from her mother. Mrs. Marcela could easily foresee in the social column of the local newspaper, *O Correio Perobinha-campense*, the publication of another of those vicious notes inspired (she had no doubts) in her sister-in-law Antonia's gossip: Eager to show off at others' expense, Marcela Gallo Sardinha Bezerra Leitão opened the doors of her local residence, the manor house at the Fazenda Mato Grosso, to her lovely niece Vanessa, glittering star in the firmament of celebrities of this august municipality, and unscrupulously usurped money from her not just to compensate her assistants in the kitchen, but also to pay for the luxury uniform worn by one of them, Orchid by name, who was the author of exotic gourmet repasts free of animal products served on the occasion.

“Don’t worry about my expenses, Vanessa my dear. Keep your money. Your mother and you need it more than I do,” said the hostess, with a snicker of disdain.

A call from the banquet guests in the dining room reached their ears:

“Cake! Cake! Cake!”

Mrs. Marcela became agitated, gelatinous, dew on her upper lip.

“Orchid, put on the uniform and return to the kitchen. I will have Bezerra talk to you all.”

Mizz Orchid shivered:

“No need. I wouldn’t think of it, Mr. Bezerra in the kitchen!”

“For the love of God, put on the uniform and serve the cake. We will resolve your situation later.”

“But I ain’t finished makin’ the cake,” said the maid. “Vanessa didn’t show me how to do the whatchamacallit, I forgot its name.”

Vanessa slapped her forehead:

“Silly me! I forgot to teach Mizz Orchid to make the tofu icing.”

Diogo had the idea for tofu icing whipped in the blender with pitanga berries, vanilla and molasses; he was inspired by one Megan had once made at home with strawberries, vanilla and maple syrup. They had to go to some lengths to find tofu there. Vanessa had spent all of fifteen minutes ransacking in vain all the supermarkets and little stores in Perobinha do Campo, until she had the bright idea of looking for the product in one of the seven highly successful sushi bars that had set up shop in the last few years on the main drag and surroundings.

Mrs. Marcela lowered her eyebrows, two black clouds in a storm:

“Cake or no cake, tofu or no tofu, I am going to call Mr. Bezerra right now.”

Lordy, Mizz Orchid said under her breath, taking off to the maids' bathroom to don the uniform. Vanessa took advantage and vomited in the other bathroom.

Bezerra Leitão came to the library and, tough and impermeable as a rock, was informed of the situation. He knew who was teaching the maids to rebel. They were married to or living with workers who were against the modernization of the farm. Those folks were meeting with that rabble of union organizers and environmentalists at Norato's store to plot something against him. Bezerra Leitão should not make himself more fragile resolving spats in the kitchen. He should not waste any bullets negotiating over some boutique item, much less with maids, and on top of it all vegetarian, or vegan, or what-the-fuck. The patriarch should not make a fool of himself to the peons. He must preserve his authority for the ugly fight that might be brewing.

"Marcela," he said, "my territory is the pasture, the corrals, the peons, business, politicians. To settle squabbles with cooks you should call the priest."

Mrs. Marcela lifted her proud chin. A gold choker was buried in the folds of her neck.

"Father Cristiano is my guest. Far be it from me to commit the gaffe of putting him in an embarrassing situation."

"Then call Diogo!" said the patriarch. Inside, he complimented himself for the excellent suggestion. He lowered his voice: "Since I am considering the idea of retiring and passing on all the farms to him..."

Mrs. Marcela's herculean forehead raised her heavy eyebrows:

"I would be somewhat more careful, in your shoes. Our son is now that thing there, 'vegan'. How can a vegan be responsible for cattle and hog farms?"

"Why not? One thing has nothing to do with the other. Just for comparison, look at the drug lords. They make money with the sale of drugs but they don't use drugs, you see?"

"But now Diogo is also into that animal rights thing. From what I can tell, he thinks that no one should have animals.

Animals, for him, only in nature. Animals there and humans here.”

“Right, he is against animals,” the patriarch resented. He reacted taking his fingers to his lips, as if smoking a cigarette: “But I assure you that when he finds himself as owner of four very lucrative farms, he will stop being fussy. He will recognize that the progress of civilization depends on the cooperation between animals and people.”

Mrs. Marcela agreed. Why not take advantage of the cooks’ little insurgency to test Diogo’s ability to deal with employees? Why not initiate the career of the favorite heir with a prelude of more docile subalterns and milder problems?

Mizz Orchid returned, starched in her uniform, engulfed in lavender. A miasmatic Vanessa resurfaced in a lunar sleepiness. Mrs. Marcela and Bezerra Leitão decided that their niece and the maid would enter the kitchen with Diogo. While the two women made the icing, he would negotiate with the rebels.

With Diogo’s parents being away from the banquet for a while, Megan went up to her room to call Weekeewawkeeville. She wanted to know how things were going at home. The line was busy. She dialed Sybil’s number to unload her grief about having to stay at the Bezerra Leitão home for a week. Sybil’s line was also busy. Megan decided to wait a few minutes before calling again.

Sybil’s kitchen in Cambridge was home to a conflict somewhat different from the one that had erupted in the kitchen at the manor house. Free of the excesses of Bob’s spices, utensils, and bottled water, of the cadavers and secretions of animals that he employed in his dishes, and of the filth that he had produced during the years he cooked a lot and cleaned so little, Sybil’s kitchen now breathed a pure air of raw — but eternally virgin — vegetables. Onions, potatoes and cucumbers; squash, oranges and carrots; bananas, eggplants and artichokes; kale, cauliflowers, and zucchini... a colorful, succulent and aromatic constellation of resplendent fruits, vegetables, and legumes, organic, veganic or not — in the baskets on the table, in bags hanging on the walls, on the shelves in the cupboards and in the pantry, in the drawers of the stove and the refrigerator — remained intact from the time



of their arrival from the market until they went bad. Every morning, when she fed the six cats, and every evening, when she fed them again, Sybil faced that exuberant waste of vitamins, mineral salts, fibers and antioxidants, and she felt desperate almost to the point of crying. It was true that at times, before or after a hard day of work on behalf of victims of domestic violence, she had time left over to prepare a dish or two. But she lacked the passion and the talent. Very competent to rescue and assist abused children, women and animals, she was not able to rescue from the stove a sautéed vegetable threatened with carbonization nor to assist the steaming of a simple bunch of broccoli without being sidetracked by some thought that would only return her to the path of reality when her dish was falling apart, watery and flaccid. Through her hands flowed catastrophic quantities of salt, pepper, and oil, and preparing any meal was a guerrilla war of burns, cuts, breakage and small fires. To make things worse, she had decided to stop consuming soy and wheat products that imitated meat, restricting even further the possibilities of an already rather poor home menu. Of course she could always turn to raw vegetables, as she did with fruits, when she remembered to eat them. She did wrap some whole cucumbers and cilantro in mustard leaves and held them in her hands to eat. But between her and a Pleistocene ancestor content to chew raw leaves, on his haunches under a bush or perched in a tree, there were a few million years. For Sybil, spoiled by the magic of a chef and familiar with the alternative cuisine of Boston, New York and San Francisco, healthy raw foodism involved more elaboration than half a dozen chomps on a carrot.

A little before Megan tried to call her, Sybil fed the six cats, ate a tomato and began to gnaw a bell pepper. She watched Fa, La and So wash their faces with their saliva-moistened hands. From time to time, two blade cuts would open in each of those dark and winding universes, releasing a grass-colored luminescence. Sybil turned off the light and lit a small candle. In the dimness, the glitter of the feline eyes enchanted her away from her gastronomic frustration.

The phone rang. She waited for the caller to record a message, looking at the sparks perforating the dark calm. She listened to the message. It was Bob. It's been a while since we've

spoken, Sybil, I miss your cat... you and your cats so much, I'd like to show you my new house, My cats will be happy to see you again, If you want I can make dinner for you — one hundred percent as you like it, naturally, tee hee hee, I'll be waiting for your call.

Sybil bit the bell pepper. What a cynic. She'd rather starve than accept a meal prepared by that impudent chef. Even though she missed the cats in his custody, she avoided him like the devil avoids holy water. Three months of celibacy might have left her hungrier, but for sure they left her happier. And more lucid. Each cubic inch and each second of the space-time that was once again only hers (the presence of the six remaining cats had the levity of a cult abstraction) attested to the absurdity of her having lived with the chef. She enjoyed her voluntary solitude, the flexibility of her new schedule to weave the tiny web of domestic life, not having to express, react, exchange, approve, criticize, be politic and diplomatic. She could swell up and float aimlessly within her cell, in the fluidity of her house. She wanted to be single forever. In her space-time, never again an event like Bob. Or Karen.

Karen. She hadn't heard from her in a while. Since the definitive quarrel with Bob, to be exact. Karen must be hurt. Sybil had promised to call her to discuss her proposal for them to live together again, but had given no further signal. She felt ashamed of having treated the sweet and generous Karen so shabbily. She dialed the number of her great friend and former lover to apologize.

Dr. Hernandez answered:

"I am Karen's partner. She's fixing supper. Do you want to leave a message?"

"Tell her Sybil called, please."

Silence. Sybil added:

"I just called to see how she was."

Silence. And a dry voice:

"Is that all?"

Had Sybil detected a note of hostility in the question? Or was it that her shame and guilt were distorting the intentions of the person on the other end of the line?

“That’s all, I mean, tell her also that my cell has not changed. And that my e-mail is the same.”

Silence. Should Sybil say Thank you and hang up? Dr. Hernandez’s arid voice scratched the receiver:

“Very well. But I think she won’t have time to get in touch with you. We are very busy at the sanctuary.” Her voice hydrated and added a few colors. “We’ve just brought an adult with tuberculosis from Alaska and an undernourished baby from Mexico. The poor thing was smuggled from a forest in India to be the main attraction of a small zoo in the town of Puebla.”

Sybil got flustered, she was worried:

“OK, so I’ll be going then! Best wishes for the patients.”

“Much obliged,” said the dry anew doctor.

Sybil turned on the light and snuffed out the candle. She was curious about Karen’s new partner, but not so much. She wanted Karen to have a happy union, but not so much. Not because she envied her new relationship. She wished her plenty of happiness, but of another kind. She wished her solitary happiness, like hers. She put away in the refrigerator the rest of the bell pepper she had bitten into. Ingesting pure raw vegetables had produced the paradox of feeding herself and whetting her appetite. She felt a primordial desire to gorge herself. She thought about calling an Indian restaurant to order up a steaming-hot meal, good and spicy. She looked at the nutritious and attractive items around her, with their sensual contours and in curious combinations of skin, pulp, grain and leaf, all giving off vitality. From the basket, the bag and the shelves, the untouched vegetables denounced her incompetence in domestic economy, her alienation from the earth, her revolutionary limpness. She called Megan’s house in Weekeewawkeeville. Maybe her daughter could give her a delicious recipe with vegetables that did not have to be cut, seasoned, or cooked.

Leave your message for Megan or Diogo Beep, said the answering machine.

"Megan, it's your mother. You and Diogo must be eating or making dinner, I bet. Can someone there talk to me?"

Her call was answered:

"Sybil? River here."

"River...? How are you?"

"Couldn't be better. I'm making dinner and I love to cook. And I'm talking with you."

Silence. He went on:

"Megan and Diogo are in Brazil."

"Ah, I didn't know..." Sybil shut up. She did not want to evoke her deceased negligent motherhood. She corrected herself. "I mean, I did know. I just forgot the exact dates of their trip."

"They'll be back in a week. I'm going to spend a few nights and take care of the cats and dogs."

A tinkling of silverware and plates punctuated his speaking.

"What are you cooking?" asked Sybil's taste buds.

"Cooking is not the right word. I am preparing raw food. Today's menu is hemp-seed pesto, sweet-potato spaghetti, and tomato and tamarind salad."

Sybil's mouth watered.

"Oh I would so like to be there to have dinner with you," her stomach gave vent.

River's voice seemed to trip on a utensil and to get back up, slightly panting:

"I'd also like for you to be here with me, Sybil."

She tried to fabricate something to say to him. She only managed to produce an off-key laugh. It had been three years since she last saw River. But she was still intrigued by the memory of his persistent eyes, two mischievous kids playing blue on the relief of her body. Three years ago she had avoided them, hiding behind Bob, in a game of tag. They were everywhere, the eyes of her daughter's boyfriend, two crystals planted in her way, for her to trip over. Bait in traps set on the sofa to attract her. Shiny adornments to trick her. Algae candies within reach of her

tongue. The whole week of spring break, three years ago, not a single day passed without River bringing her a book, a chocolate bar, a bouquet of flowers. Megan looked with envy at the gifts given by those inviting, spider-like hands that a bashful Sybil avoided touching. When River's desire became obvious even to Megan and Bob, the two blue sapphires were suspended in the void and immobilized by invisible threads. If she wanted, Sybil could admire them from afar surreptitiously. She could not, she did not want to. Now, if she wanted to, she could take the bait, savor the algae candies, get entangled in the web of the spider-like hands. She could lose the game of tag. If she wanted to, she could suck River's voice until she felt it in her own throat.

"We'll soon be able to dine together," she said. "Megan must have told you that I'm going to move to Weekeewawkeeville."

"Really? Great! Your daughter didn't tell me anything. When are you coming?"

Sybil fell speechless again. The fact that Megan had not informed River of her move knocked her thoughts out of place. She had to gather them to realign. Perhaps Megan was still smarting from the blow that she had suffered with him, his lack of responsibility and his careless desire. To be close to her daughter, to offer her support, to inspire courage in her: that was the main reason for Sybil's move south. The blue sapphires should remain paralyzed in the void.

"I don't know when I'm going to move. I already have a buyer for this house. And I'll be able to continue my work in Florida, in the same organization that employs me here. But I have to buy a cozy house for one human and six cats."

"That will be easy. Yesterday I saw two houses for sale near the university. I can get all the data and pass it along to you."

"Thanks. If one of the houses interests me, I'll go see it as soon as possible."

"You already have a place to stay: my apartment," warmed the voice, spun the spider-like fingers, melted the algae candies. "With homemade raw food."

Sybil salivated and said simply That's very kind of you, before hanging up.

Megan also hung up, in her room at the manor house, after one more frustrated attempt to speak with her mother. She went back to the company of the others in the dining room. Standing, Tiago was beginning to recite a poem:

### Absolute Applause

the perhappiness of performance?  
Maybe a felicity of receipt  
though staying pains of public chance  
surveill the crop of newness found  
from recent loss or stop  
golden paths of screams to wean  
the broken scales  
the seeded weeds of yeah or nay  
dance and song  
per claims or names  
happenstance  
the short time home.

Father Cristiano began the applause, more moved by the wine than by the poem that the firstborn had just declaimed:

"Lovely poem! Excellent performance!" With his palms turned up, he pointed at the poet Tiago and the teller of jokes Patricia. "There is no doubt that the Divine Holy Spirit bestowed on this family the mark of genius!"

Mrs. Marcela thanked the priest for the compliment. She studied the reaction of the other guests, especially that of Antonia, with a troubled smile squeezing her dimples. She wanted to be sure of the success of her idea to have a literary interlude at the table until the rebellion of the maids was put

down and the birthday cake served. She was so happy to see Antonia agree with the judgment of Father Cristiano. The journalist admitted that the quality of the firstborn's poem was better than she had expected. She even told the author that she would like to read all his texts. She recognized in the work a citation of Paulo Leminski and the influence of that suffering polyglot and cosmopolitan poet, as well as the search for novelty and the ludic will. Not as moved by the wine as the priest, she promised to check with her contacts in the editorial domain about the possibility of publishing Tiago's poems in a slim volume, as long as all the poems were as good as that one.

The author widened his eyes, distrustful. His long fingers caressed the tablecloth:

"Thank you, auntie. But my poems are not for sale."

Rodrigo guffawed, relieved. He would not survive the trauma of seeing a work of his brother's in the bookstores before seeing a film of his own on a screen somewhere, even if it were only the film lab. Patricia said that she had understood nothing of the poem, but that it really was pretty. She suggested that the poet exhibit his work on a website and that the filmmaker make his film with the camera on the cell phone.

"That's for amateurs," Rodrigo responded. He aimed his eyes at his father, who was staring at the wall clock. "Trust me, Patricia. One day I'll make it."

Megan was also able to appreciate the poem for its cadence and sound. She'd like to hear it several times, like listening to a song, even without understanding the words. She shot a smile the author's way, with a generous helping of teeth. Tiago received it with the airs of a prima donna.

Mrs. Marcela called for Rodrigo to speak about his cinematic project. He was skittish, There is a reason for someone to express himself in an audiovisual mode and that reason is that words alone are not enough. But in the current phase of the project he was working on a storyboard with an acquaintance of his who was a designer and in the near future, nearer than you might think, he would be happy to show the results frame by frame to whomever might be interested.

Mrs. Marcela excused herself for a second and went to her room. She came back with three toy stuffed animals in her arms and enormous rabbit ears on her head.

"Our gathering must also include samples of the work of Diego," she sniffled.

Bezerra Leitão went to have a smoke on the veranda. Megan, Antonia, Patricia and the priest ran their fingers through the artificial hair and feathers; they were impressed how similar the stuffed miniatures were to real animals. It occurred to Father Cristiano that the former model Vanessa could close the session with a parade of beachwear and country fashion, and he ran the palm of his hand along the contours of a pussy cat and a penguin. The filmmaker Rodrigo scoffed at that industrialized art of cutting, sewing, and stuffing, which he considered to be a lesser art, under the even more disdainful eyes of Tiago, who held poetry to be the most sublime of artistic endeavors.

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, came singing down the hall a chorus of maids with Vanessa and Zé Luiz, led by Diogo bearing the cake.

A paralyzed Mrs. Marcela observed the procession. What in dickens was that, lordalmighty? How many asinine acts would her favorite heir be capable of? How vulgar could he get? Following her natural impulse, her eyes inspected the servants' feet, hidden by the Chinese slippers. Her rabbit ears fidgeted, Antonia, Father Cristiano, she fretted, Do you think, If it's not too much trouble, It would be better... But the two most important guests were already repeating the birthday song together with the hybrid and implausible ensemble. Deuzicreide and Silvanira moved the dirty dishes onto a cart, pushed it to a corner of the room and ran to join the others to sing everything all over again, but this time in a purposefully out-of-whack round song, with overlapping lines. The priest also superimposed the first verse on the racket, restarting the song out-of-sync, as Antonia howled the song backwards. At that point the hostess allowed herself to relax a bit, and she let out a hoot, her muscles reverting to their habitual jello-like consistency. She didn't even notice that her husband had come back to the table with a lit cigarette, a banned behavior at the manor house ever since he'd



let ashes fall on the soy king's *petits fours* during a benefit teatime.

Bezerra Leitão locked his jaws and toughened the leather of his face, resistant to the festivities. Vanessa began the traditional follow-up birthday chant, the *pique-pique*, *E pro Diogo nada? Tudo!* Megan loved the sound and the rhythm of it all, *é pique é pique é pique é pique é pique, é hora é hora é hora é hora é hora, rá tim bum*, later she might ask the peasant whose name was a flower to teach her the lovely ditty. Diogo concentrated on making a wish, that all animals on Earth might live free of human oppression, and with one breath he blew out the twenty-four soy candles purchased by his girlfriend at the Mother Earth market.

Pieces of cake on their plates, the employees moved to the corner where the cart of dirty dishes was. Mrs. Marcela peered at them as they timidly savored their slices. As nimble as she might be at entertaining mixed groups, she would not be able to create opportunities to integrate all the peasant ladies and the young man of sow-friendly fame into the circle of noble guests. She wouldn't even know how to address the servants in adequate fashion. The vocabulary she had at her disposal to interact with them didn't apply to the present circumstances. How to approach Deuzicreide, for example, and tell her, in front of Antonia and the priest, The eggnog-is-too-thin-do-it-over, without sounding like a complete idiot? The presence of employees in the dining room behaving like guests sabotaged her talent as a hostess. They couldn't adjust to the ambiance of niceties and frivolities that made her banquets both noble and cheerful. Mrs. Marcela realized she had a social obligation: to accelerate to the maximum the last stage of her reception. Without wasting any time, not even to take off her rabbit ears, she herself put the cake away in the refrigerator to prevent seconds. She flitted from hand to hand, pilfering forkfuls of cake from the diners' plates and sticking them into her mouth. She collided with Father Cristiano, knocking from his holy hand a bottle ready to pour wine into a glass held by Vanessa. Then she attracted the priest to the yard, where chairs were nonexistent and the road was closer, and delicately pushed him toward his enslaved mount Pontius Pilate, who was hitched to a branch of a tabebuia tree. Father Cristiano,

a little dizzy, got on his horse and departed. Back in the dining room, Mrs. Marcela headed in the direction of Antonia and made up a story that she'd put together an album with photos of her sister-in-law next to each of her six exes and that she didn't know where she'd put it. Inebriated with alcohol and nostalgia, Antonia called on Patricia to help her look throughout the manor house to find that album and get rid of it, starting, as the hostess suggested, with an old jacaranda chest in the room that Antonia and her younger daughter were sharing.

Freed from the most illustrious guests, Mrs. Marcela now felt comfortable to address the maids:

"Clean this up right now. I don't want to see a spec. Then you can go. Except for Deuzicreide, she still has work to do."

Mizz Orchid changed her clothes and took off with Zé Luiz in such a rush that the hostess was spared the sight of the spread of those strong tree roots walking the course of her floors in a pair of worn out flip-flops. Megan was sorry that the peasant was leaving so soon, and with Diogo's help she hastily formulated a phrase in Portuguese to tell her, Cake with tofu was very tasty Mizz Orchid thank you good night.

Bezerra Leitão went out for a walk with his favorite heir. The exercise woke up his numb leg, and the fresh air his lungs. The patriarch lit a cigarette, took a deep drag and, choking on the smoke, coughed to his son that he tell him all the details of the negotiation in the kitchen.

Mrs. Marcela retired to her chambers, confused. She was feeling out of place in her own home. The presence of a new Diogo with the strange pasty girl had turned her territory upside down. It had turned a banquet of nobles into a hootenanny of nobodies, a traditional family get-together into a little charity event. Like an obstacle in a strategic locale, the couple Megan & Diogo had shaped the interaction of elements in a space that until then had been defined and manipulated by her. They had made her behave like an actress forced to change her acting near the end of the show due to problems with the props. There is something wrong with spaces that force people to change. Environments should not shape human action, just as props should not shape characters' actions. Or should they? Mrs.

Marcela looked at herself in the mirror. She saw a fat and exhausted woman with an impeccable mink collar and outlandish rabbit ears. Wearing animal ears makes people look ridiculous. But wearing fur, animals' coats, did not — she thought. Animals' coats draped on people's bodies makes them chic. There is a right place for everything, chair at the table, pig in the pot, mink in chic clothes, poor people in rich people's kitchens. The rule seemed simple enough, but that evening Mrs. Marcela had almost lost her way in the new space. Maybe she should start thinking about no longer entertaining. Perhaps the trajectory of a good hostess went through the same process as the career of a successful professional: promising beginning, enviable apex, pathetic waning days, and honorable retirement. She took off the rabbit ears, disrobed, and put on her silk nightgown. She got into bed to watch the ten o'clock soap opera. She was awakened by a knock at the door.

"Come in!" she commanded in a bad mood.

Deuzicreide served her a cup of eggnog with whiskey. Mrs. Marcela drank that potion on a daily basis, before going to sleep, to avoid waking up starving in the middle of the night. She took a sip:

"It needs sugar."

"Yes, ma'am," mumbled Deuzicreide, taking the cup back to the kitchen.

Mrs. Marcela always found fault with the eggnog, no matter how carefully Deuzicreide prepared it. The maid put two more spoonfuls of sugar in the beverage, spit into it, stirred it, and reheated it.

"It's a little better," the matron snarled, her upper lip painted by the golden milk.

"May I go, Mrs. Marcela?" Deuzicreide asked.

"What time is it?"

"Almost eleven."

"What time did you start today?"

It was the same thing every night. Mrs. Marcela would complain about the eggnog with whiskey. Deuzicreide would go

back to the kitchen, correct the defect in the beverage, and spit into the cup. When she would ask to go, she would have to say what time it was and what time she had started.

“I started at seven A.M.”

Mrs. Marcela, the martyr, would sigh:

“OK, go ahead, go.”

Bezerra Leitão came into the room a little before midnight. Mrs. Marcela’s snoring was strepitous. He quietly began to unbutton his shirt. She awoke with the rubbing of his fingers on the bone buttons.

“Ah, what a night!” she sputtered. “And God only knows what else I’ll have to put up with the rest of this week.”

Bezerra Leitão planted his half-bare trunk in the bed, his small graying tits sagging. He lifted his extended fingers to hold a longing for tobacco to his mouth and aborted an inhalation of imaginary smoke. Mrs. Marcela became alert. The unconscious smoking gesture indicated that her husband had something important to say. He began:

“The boy negotiated double pay for a week for the cooks and maids.”

Mrs. Marcela’s neck spread out on the pillows like a comforter. The gap in her face articulated:

“So he proved to be a wimp!”

“On the contrary,” Bezerra Leitão corrected as delicately as he could. “He maneuvered around the cooks who make the meats. They wanted to get even more than double saying that beef, poultry and fish are a lot of work.”

“Who do they think they are? And how did Diogo get around them?”

The patriarch sat on his fingers so they would not rise to his lips and tempt him with the reminder of his addiction.

“Diogo decided that this week none of them is going to have to cook animal products.”

“Holy God, that’s all I needed,” grumbled Mrs. Marcela. She arranged the pillows against the wall and sat up, flattening

them with her hefty back. "What am I going to do with a band of idle women in the kitchen?"

I gave the cooks an orientation, Megan, telling them to be creative, to invent recipes and sauces, to develop dishes that will last in the freezer. I instituted a contest to choose the most original culinary idea.

"Diogo is a smart cookie," was the comment of the proud patriarch. "Yes the girls will earn double. But they will have to make extra effort!"

"That's true," Mrs. Marcela acknowledged. "And they won't have time to gossip."

But those six cooks are going to have to be awfully creative to produce original dishes all week with just four ingredients, said Megan, hugging the pillow. Don't they grow anything besides rice, beans, corn and tomatoes on this farm? That's absurd in such a large rural area.

They used to grow coffee, honey. Now they plant almost nothing but corn, mainly for livestock to eat, and they rotate beans for the subsistence of hired hands. Rice and tomatoes come more from the market than from the fields of our farm.

"It's the same thing in almost all the rural areas of the planet," said the environmentalist of the NGO Green-Yellow Smile, at Norato's store. "The will and the know-how to raise crops are disappearing along with the fertility of the earth. Agrochemicals and livestock are covering the world with deserts."

Diogo imitated Silvanira, *Agora as pranta do seu Bezerra Leitão é as vaca e os porco*. Then he tried to turn the phrase into American country bumpkin language with a nasalized voice and a twisted mouth, His plants is cows 'n' hawgs now.

"Diogo also decided that one of Silvanira's tasks will be to explore other possibilities for vegetables in the markets in Perobinha do Campo," the animated patriarch continued.

Mrs. Marcela shook her beefy body:

"Ha ha ha, explore other possibilities for vegetables, tee hee hee, you are starting to talk like your son, I see that this

business of veganism is catching on.” She closed her gap, felled her thick eyebrows onto her face: “In my language, that means spending money on a pile of bland greens when we could just kill a pig.”

And you’re going to like this one, Megan. Mizz Orchid put her foot down, she doesn’t want to hear about working at the big house for any amount of money in this world.

Cool, said Megan, tossing the pillow aside and hugging Diogo, I’ll be able to interact with her in her own environment!

“Orchid is starting to have a lot of gall. She said that she’s not going to put up with bull from her colleagues anymore, much less from the madam of the house,” Bezerra Leitão related.

“Poor woman’s pride,” Mrs. Marcela assured him. “She’s the one who’s out of luck. It’s going to take her even longer to pay for the boutique uniform.”

Bezerra Leitão cleared his throat, maybe because he missed the feel of smoke:

“Diogo abolished payment for all uniforms, pumpkin.”

“What a fool!” growled Mrs. Marcela. “He doesn’t know what breed he’s dealing with. Servants, give them an inch and they’ll take a mile.”

“The elites, the more they have, the more they want,” said the landless activist to the environmentalist at Norato’s store. “What did Bezerra Leitão do with the areas of exhausted soil, for example? As soon as he saw the agrarian-reform office looking at them to create settlements, he started to cover them all with concrete to raise confined animals.”

Think about it, Diogo, a whole farm in your hands!

In *our* hands, honey, Gimme those boobs, Gimme a kiss.

We’ll transform the farm into a communitarian vegan agro-forest with sanctuaries for cows and pigs.

Diogo released his girlfriend’s breasts and hugged the pillow, We’ll see, honey.

What do you mean, *we’ll see*?

Well, we'll see. Things are very complicated, Megan. Gimme a kiss, I'm so sleepy.

"Our son is no idiot. If you weigh everything, evaluate the terms of the negotiation, you'll see that Diogo got more than he conceded. And there's more, Marcela. Without realizing it, with the raise for the maids he's giving the workers to understand that I'm willing to resolve their problems."

"Pure demagoguery!" shouted the director of the Farmworkers Union of the Perobinha do Campo Region. "Bezerra Leitão and that vegetarian sissy think that they can buy us off with a one-week raise for our women!"

"Their attitude just reflects the elite's determination to perpetuate the social exclusion of the farmworkers," asserted the landless activist.

"I propose the immediate mobilization of the bases for a joint direct action!" said the director.

"Hold on, wait a minute," said the president of the union. "This is not the time for the direct action that the comrade has in mind. The bases are not organized. Look at this meeting. There are precious few souls here."

"I concur," intervened the environmentalist. "There's a lack of unity between the project of the landless, that of the farmworkers, and that of the environmentalists."

"We need to define clear positions regarding all that and insist a little more on nonviolent negotiations with Bezerra Leitão," said the union president.

"I disagree!" yelled the director. "The negotiations have been dragging on too long. In the meantime, the boss got even richer. And the workers? They're being demoted from exploited to unemployed."

"The direct action will not resolve our problem," affirmed the president. "On the contrary, it will set public opinion and the police against us."

"Yes it will resolve part of our problem," shouted more softly the director, "because the farm owner will take a hit and that will show that in practice we have power: in this case, the

power to control his profit. The direct action will also draw the attention of progressive sectors around the country and around the world to the terrible situation of this region's rural workers and environment. That is, the direct action that I propose will, no doubt whatsoever, have positive consequences, especially if it lands some of us in jail!"

A dizzied Mizz Orchid was trying to follow what each one was saying. If she had the ability to memorize or to write down some of those words, later she could ask Zé Luiz what they meant. She felt proud of her son for his comprehension of what the men were shouting at Norato's store in the middle of the night. Where had they learned to talk so fancy? Could they have found time to go to school? The only person who looked like he had a diploma was the environmentalist, a white guy called Goiabeira with thin arms and smelling like citronella. The rest looked and smelled like Zé Luiz, tanned by the sun while standing in cow manure. Their protests and arguments collided before her like birds of a frightened flock. Mizz Orchid felt stupid and unfortunate. She should have gone home to bed instead of accepting her son's invitation to see what a meeting was like.

"Ask Zé Luiz's mother," Norato mocked. "Ask her opinion."

Mizz Orchid's heart leapt. She had the impression that everyone's stares were shoving her against the hard and cold wall. Norato wanted her to say more. But she had already spoken a lot, she had told them everything that had happened hours earlier at the manor house, in simple words that Zé Luiz adorned and fancied up: how she had — almost by accident, more to spite her peers than her superior — told the maids to ask for a raise for that week, challenged them not to respond to Mrs. Marcela's bell, and served as spokesperson of the decision to go on strike.

A sardonic Norato insisted:

"Ask Mizz Orchid what she thinks of you all carrying out a joint direct action."

Zé Luiz did not like Norato mocking his mother. Relatively speaking, she had shown herself to be just as combative as any activist for agrarian reform, formalized



employment, or environmental preservation. Norato would not be so condescending if she were a man or had a husband.

“Mother has been wanting to come to a meeting for a while,” said Zé Luiz. “Today was good because we left work together. It was a good day to come because she has the issue of the kitchen revolt and the raise given by Bezerra Leitão’s son.”

Norato burst into laughter, ha ha ha, kitchen revolt, a week’s raise given by a pansy who won’t kill a calf because he feels sorry for it. In the arena surrounded by serious faces, Norato’s laughter bucked by itself.

“Well I think it was good that Zé Luiz introduced Mizz Orchid to our group,” said the union president. “It’s an honor to have the collaboration of a lady capable of showing such courage and initiative in her workplace, whatever it may be.”

Mizz Orchid let flow a bashful smile.

“Norato laughs at what he doesn’t understand,” opined Zé Luiz. “He’s his own boss and he doesn’t need land. He owns the store. Me, the more I work, the more I owe Bezerra Leitão. Norato, every time he sells something, his profit is fifty percent.”

Norato reacted:

“But you use and abuse my store and merchandise. You run an endless tab. At the meetings you’re the one who most eats the free spam and cornbread that I provide.”

Mizz Orchid elbowed her son’s arm:

“Bad boy, Zé Luiz.” She turned to the owner of the store. “That ain’t how I raised my son, Mr. Norato. You pardon us.”

Norato softened his stance.

“No problem, ma’am,” he muttered.

The meeting went forward into the night. Little by little, with a few moments of dread, Mizz Orchid put together the puzzle that she had become part of as a strange piece. She understood the game of fancy words, became familiar with the players and figured out their goals. Like those of the world she knew, and of all the other worlds she had heard of, the words of that game were about the abuses of the vulnerable at the hands of the powerful.

The words of the union director hemorrhaged in an angry gush, almost as intense as the millenary oppression that he fought against. They inflamed his throat, swelled the veins on his neck, tinted his face red. The director's name was Big Foot, and he represented the workers like Zé Luiz and Mizz Orchid, whom Bezerra Leitão allowed to live on the farm to take care of animals and plots of crops. He enumerated his objectives and insisted upon his position:

“Reduced working hours. Formal employment. Raises. No more debt for work tools. And free classes to learn to operate the modern facilities so we can compete with the personnel brought by Holy Hill. But since none of those demands was met, a direct action is needed.”

The union president was firm:

“Not before exhausting all the possibilities for nonviolent negotiation!”

The president, in Mizz Orchid's view, had the best manners there. Every time he opened his mouth, she would get timid, fearful that he would address her to show respect for the only lady present. He had real blond hair, different from Doralice's, the blonde hooker that Zé Luiz went out with. His name was German. His goals the same as Big Foot's, except for the direct action.

“What direct action is that, Zé Luiz?” Mizz Orchid whispered. Zé Luiz pretended not to hear.

“Bezerra Leitão turned into a whore for Holy Hill,” raged Big Foot. “He partnered with the corporation on his other farms, in Goiás, Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul. Now he's fuckin' us over here.”

“What fuckin' over is that, Zé Luiz?” again whispered Mizz Orchid.

German looked at her. He had heard her! Mizz Orchid felt ashamed. She often thought bad words to herself, she enjoyed it. But she could count on the fingers of one hand the times when a bad word had made it from her mind to her tongue. Just her luck that a gentleman had witnessed the word fuckin' on her lips!

“Bezerra Leitão is doing the same thing that many farmers in the Center West of the country are doing,” German explained to her as her eyes sought a distant corner to hide. “They are partnering with the biotechnology company Holy Hill for intensive animal farming, mainly hogs. Those who don’t jump on the bandwagon lose competitive edge in the market, both national and export. You know what a biotechnology company is, intensive farming, those sorts of things, don’t you, Mizz Orchid?”

Mizz Orchid looked down. Wasn’t it enough to be taken by the polite union officer for someone who talks dirty? Or did she also have to suffer the humiliation of displaying her ignorance to him? A sarcastic Norato snorted. Zé Luiz came to her rescue:

“Come on, German, everybody knows that intensive farming is when you pile tons of animals in the smallest possible space to get the biggest profit. And that biotechnology company is the one with all those agrochemicals, drugs and all sorts of stuff that give the impression of helping but actually do a lot of harm, for critters and folks both, and the land, the plants, the water, the air.”

To Mizz Orchid’s relief, the environmentalist Goiabeira took the floor. She could relax her nerves and stop cowering, as long as German did not speak again. But Goiabeira also looked at her:

“In a sense, Bezerra Leitão’s attitude is comprehensible. Holy Hill comes with a sort of complete package: animal feed, pesticides, tools, drugs, all interdependent. And they also come with personnel trained to handle all those things.”

“Holy Hill even comes with a friggin’ veterinarian!” shouted Big Foot, his eyes trying to pierce Mizz Orchid’s lowered eyelids. “The vet gives a discount to any farmer who uses the company’s drugs. You see, Mizz Orchid, the web of products and services that Holy Hill weaves to trap the clients?”

Mizz Orchid nodded yes. She had become the destination of all explanations. Those men surely thought of her as a dumb

person. She thought it apt to make a comment. She lifted her eyes, but they encountered German's, and fell back down.

"Holy Hill's scheme is expensive, Mizz Orchid," continued German.

"It's only for big farmers, Mizz Orchid," said Big Foot.

"But it's quick profit, mother," Zé Luiz stuck his nose in.

"And the profit is quick because production is speeded up with lots of drugs," said the landless rep.

A fazed Mizz Orchid breathed deeply.

"It's drugs for everything, all the time, Mizz Orchid."

"Drugs to cure the animals, always sick from overcrowding."

"Drugs to double or triple their weight."

"Drugs to increase the production of eggs and milk."

"Drugs to kill pests and parasites."

Mizz Orchid felt short of breath.

"That mountain of drugs has awful side-effects, Mizz Orchid."

"Not to incur a loss, the farmer has to send the animals to slaughter when they are still young, before the side-effects show."

Big Foot yelled:

"Me, my comrades present here and you too, Mizz Orchid, every time we drink a glass of water, we're taking drugs that Holy Hill releases into the environment!"

Mizz Orchid could no longer take the pressure. She jumped from her chair and shook Zé Luiz:

"You hear, you rascal? Every time you eat Norato's spam, you're takin' in all them drugs the farmers give to the pigs!"

A church-like silence fell. Mizz Orchid covered her mouth with her hand. She shrank back into her seat. She looked at the motionless men in their chairs. No one was looking at her. Norato got up and began to fill a plastic bag with cans of soda and packages of crackers. Big Foot bleated:

“Question of order! No distractions, please. Let’s get back to the agenda. I wanna say the following. With or without biotechnology, with or without environmental destruction, a poor man gotta feed his family. Myself, and the comrades represented by me, we’d happily work in Bezerra Leitão’s modern facilities, if the son of a bitch gave us the chance. But we’re becoming obsolete. We’ll have to leave the farm.”

“You’ll be welcomed with open arms in my community,” the landless rep poked fun.

All had a good laugh. The landless one said, playfully, that he was being serious, that his camp by the train tracks was not Brazil’s presidential ranch but it did have reasonably good infrastructure, with new canvas shelters, sanitary facilities in the River Perobinha, medical attention in the health clinic in Perobinha do Campo, and even monthly food baskets distributed by the federal government.

“Food baskets are barely enough,” he warned. “But you won’t starve. There’s always room for one more family, or a hundred.”

Mizz Orchid found it nice that the landless worker, an individual who didn’t have a nickel to his name, could joke around about his situation. Being like that was almost like being a philosopher or an artist, she mused. They called him Sparrow. He was diminutive and lively like a bird’s foot. All too early, poverty had devastated his gums, where only a few stumps remained.

Norato grabbed two cans of spam off a shelf. He saw Mizz Orchid’s stern eyes stand out in her rigid face turned toward him. He put the cans back and took down a larger one of guava paste. He opened it and served slices of the sweet with cornbread. The landless man buried his gums in the treat with gusto.

“Sparrow has something to tell us today,” announced Norato, handing over to the landless man the plastic bag he had filled with sodas and crackers.

Sparrow stood up. Mizz Orchid could see the treat dance on his tongue behind the seminude gums.

“Comrades, I got nothing more to do here,” he said. “Norato already caught on and suspected that I only come to

meetings to eat for free..." The men laughed. Norato stretched his sardonic grin, battling with a force that was curling his lips downward. "I'm shit poor, but I do got two treasures: the will to fight and the will to fuck. And while I don't know when to stop fuckin', I do know when to stop fightin'. In these dead lands dominated by Bezerra Leitão, hogs and cattle have already been settled. Here there's no future for families of people. This is the last meeting I'll be at with you."

"Hold on, Sparrow," said Big Foot. "You and the others who are camped out are gonna be that soft on Bezerra Leitão?"

"We won't bang our heads against the wall," responded Sparrow, leaning on the frame of the door. "There's a lot of land around here that's been classified as idle, and it's just asking for squatters."

"But you can capitalize on the temporary failure," flamed Big Foot, "by engaging in the direct action that I proposed..."

"Enough talk of the direct action!" interrupted German. "There will be no direct action. Period."

The environmentalist yawned his citronella breath. He checked his watch. Mizz Orchid admired his thin wrist wrapped by the watch, reminiscent of a wedding band on a finger. Both hands held like crabs, Goiabeira scratched circles on his scalp.

"What we have to do, my friends, is to come up with a project that can be shared by those who work for Bezerra Leitão and by environmentalists, that identifies rural laborers as guardians of nature, rather than destroyers of nature," he counseled. "And when I speak of nature, I am referring to the sources of food, water, and air necessary for life. We'd have to convince Bezerra Leitão to employ, in fair conditions, hundreds or perhaps thousands of workers to help recuperate his exhausted lands, to decontaminate his waters, to grow diverse organic crops and to raise animals organically. For all that, we'd have to show him evidence of the enormous economic potential of sustainable organic production."

"Agreed," said German. "But Bezerra Leitão will only think this matter over if he has incentives from the government."

"Of course," said Goiabeira. "But unfortunately the government wants to give incentives to short-term agribusiness like what Bezerra Leitão is doing in the Center West because that business generates foreign-exchange credits. So we have a herculean task to convince the government too..."

"Burecrats! Sellouts!" Big Foot cut in, the veins sticking out on his neck. "To leave the solution to our problems in the hands of capitalists and the government is to admit our own impotence to change the status quo. It's putting off change indefinitely. The direct action that I propose, on the contrary, will eliminate, here and now, part of the concrete monster that Bezerra Leitão has been creating by exploiting workers and depleting natural resources!"

Mizz Orchid smelled trouble and destruction of some kind in those complicated words. Her survival instinct recommended caution. Her timidity recommended she behave. But the force of curiosity pried open her mouth and loosened her tongue. She grabbed her son's arm:

"Zé Luiz, explain to me, for the love of God, what direct action is that?"

She didn't speak under her breath. She spoke out loud, on purpose, to attract everyone's attention and to bring back to the surface the perverse desire of those men there to show off their knowledge and humiliate an ignorant woman. Should any one of them, even German, turn toward her and deliver the requested response, she wouldn't lower her eyes in shame. She wouldn't lose her breath. She wouldn't let her heart skip a bit.

But no one took notice of her strident wish to learn.

"See here, Big Foot," said Goiabeira to the union director. "Of course none of us will be able stop you from engaging in a direct action, if you're determined to do it. But your act will be backed exclusively by your conscience, it will not have the encouragement or endorsement of this committee."

"I wanna do that direct action with Big Foot!" quivered the voice of a woman.

Two or three seconds went by before the men gathered in the store were certain that they had heard the voice of Mizz

Orchid. Zé Luiz grabbed her arm, Let's go mother, it's gettin' very late and you're tired. Norato snickered his sarcasm, shaking his head.

Big Foot welcomed the volunteer's statement with renewed hope. It didn't matter to him that Mizz Orchid didn't have the slightest idea what she'd just said. For weeks he'd been trying to recruit activists for the direct action, among both the base and the leadership, unsuccessfully. Activists in that region, in his opinion, weren't worth a nickel. There weren't solid men, like those in activity in Rio Grande do Sul, Mato Grosso do Sul or even other parts of the state of São Paulo. They were passive, therefore reactionary. The base was naive: they sat on their hands waiting for something to be done by a government that had betrayed the left, in cahoots with the capitalists of globalized agribusiness. The leadership was cowardly: they called for reformist and conciliatory measures that perpetuated the power of those who exploited. Big Foot looked at his ally out of the corner of his eye. Aply or not, even without political awareness, that woman had participated in a direct action with other cooks, producing a wildcat strike that had yielded a small temporary raise for them. Mizz Orchid was no big deal but she was a start. She was a follower. When other activists found out that Big Foot had begun to attract followers, they would start cooperating with him and at the same time with each other. That voluntary cooperation would be the seed of an anarchist collective in the region of Perobinha do Campo, one of the director's ambitions.

"Welcome to the struggle, comrade," he said to Mizz Orchid.

German interfered:

"Comrade Big Foot is being antidemocratic. He's manipulating an innocent person. Mizz Orchid knows nothing of the direct action that the comrade is proposing, therefore she can't join in."

Mizz Orchid didn't like being considered innocent by the best-mannered union man there. She liked even less hearing him say that she knew nothing about the action in question. As for knowing about it, she didn't really know, truth be told. She'd only offered her support to try to discover what the action was,



and later, if need be, she'd blow everybody off and not support anything. But who was German to tell Big Foot which actions she could join or not? Mizz Orchid could no longer stand being treated like a simpleton by that band of men, where even a destitute fellow with no land and no teeth stood up talking like a college teacher.

Zé Luiz once again rushed to the defense of his mother. He tried to impress his colleagues with the use of some activist jargon:

"Comrade German is being antidemocratic and authoritarian as well, by denying to my comrade and mother the choice of the alternative option to engage in the direct action. I propose that one of the comrades explain the issue to her so that she can then be able to have conditions to opt for a conscious choice with full knowledge."

Mizz Orchid's eyes smeared her son with pride. She didn't know that, besides understanding the complicated tongue of the meetings, he could also speak that language.

"Autonomy for Mizz Orchid!" Big Foot bellowed his demand.

"Autonomy for Mizz Orchid!" Sparrow repeated, leaning on the doorframe.

Mizz Orchid had succeeded in becoming the center of attention again. She had to rebel against her own shyness, facing up to the flow of boiling blood in her head held high. Big Foot felt he was the one best fit to give her the requested information. With some effort he emitted a low voice:

"Direct action, Mizz Orchid, is when..."

"I already got what direct action is," she cut him off, shrieking. "It's when we ourself do something, instead of sittin' 'round waitin' for the bosses or the government to do it."

Sparrow tried to improve the concept:

"Direct action is when people themselves do something to make their lives better, without waiting for the help of the law or of the powers that be."

"Don't mess me up, Mr. Sparrow!" Mizz Orchid got irritated. "I done understood the philosophy just fine. What I need to know is something else. I need to know what direct action I'm gonna be doin' with Big Foot."

Norato shot his biting smile at his colleagues. Sparrow peeled himself off the doorframe and sat back down in his chair. Big Foot coughed lightly.

"What we're going to do, Mizz Orchid," he said smoothly, like a fine thread of olive oil, "is break down some small areas of the concrete building for pigs and release the animals from Bezerra Leitão's intensive animal farming."

Mizz Orchid was amazed at how daring the operation was but tried not to let on. She set her eyes on the ceiling in search of conclusions. Norato guffawed:

"Don't hide anything from Mizz Orchid, Big Foot. Tell her the most interesting part for a vegetarian. Or are you fixing to surprise her?"

Big Foot signaled him to shut up. Mizz Orchid didn't hear or see them, she was concentrating on what she had learned from the discussions at the meeting. She reflected on the director's proposal. She found more than fair the idea of decreasing Bezerra Leitão's profit by destroying a piece of the patrimony that he had built at the cost of exploiting poor folk and that was poisoning everything that was still alive. She remembered the objections made by German and Goiabeira. She asked about the possibility of someone going to jail.

"If anyone's arrested, they'll be released soon enough," Big Foot responded, perfectly calm.

Goiabeira intervened:

"Soon enough? I don't think so! If I'm not mistaken, you can get six years in prison for criminal conspiracy, apology of crime, and legal disobedience."

Norato risked:

"I've heard that the sentence for those things is four years, but you can file some motions, appeal the sentence, annul the sentence and get out of jail in a month."

Even Zé Luiz took a swing:

“You produce an alibi and in less than a week you’re back on the street.”

“Wait, people,” Big Foot resumed. “No one’s gonna be arrested. We’ll be very careful not to leave clues.”

“You really gonna be careful?” Mizz Orchid made sure.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Big Foot said. “And even if someone snitches, they won’t be able to prove anything.”

Mizz Orchid thought that it seemed like a pretty good plan. It seemed even nicer with the pigs leaving the concrete barn behind as they headed to the woods. How many critters were there? More than a thousand, she’d heard Zé Luiz say one time.

“Then you can count on me to help free the animals,” she told the director. “And you can count on Zé Luiz. He’s got a way with pigs. He done such a good job of releasin’ the ones from our pen that they never came back from the woods, not even to ask for food.”

Zé Luiz’s apprehensive pupils sniffed out the expressions on the men’s faces, trying to guess whether behind those furrowed brows heavy with political responsibility his image was beginning to be associated, in ridiculous fashion, with that of the sow Mortandela. He got up from his chair and grabbed his mother’s arm:

“Let’s go, mother, it’s late.”

Mizz Orchid pulled him back to his seat and said to the others:

“Not even Mortandela, our favorite pig, come to visit us. And she was very close to Zé Luiz.”

Zé Luiz’s mouth dried. He thought he heard someone laugh. His pupils jumped from face to face, without actually seeing any. Mizz Orchid went on enthusiastically:

“From our house to the woods it’s just a hop, skip ’n’ a jump. I went lookin’ fer them rascals. I seen where they built a big nest in the ground, makin’ the walls strong with branches, leaves and grass. Nice ’n’ tidy, nice to see. They done seen me

too. Nuno, Topete and Celestino was happy to see me and wagged their tail. Jatobá blew dirt my way from his nose. At night me and Zé Luiz got the flashlight and we done seen 'em all sleepin' together in the nest. All 'cept Mortandela, right Zé Luiz?"

Zé Luiz was staring at the floor, his head bowed, his shoulders slumped. He could feel the men's attention on his rigid face. He thought he'd better answer something. He lifted his head and opened his eyes wide:

"Yup."

His mother spoke with a voice like the fresh falling water of a cascade:

"Mortandela done built a nest away from the others. She's got eight babies!"

"And is Zé Luiz the father?" asked Norato.

Laughter exploded. Humiliated, Zé Luiz began to cut thin slices of guava paste. The knife moved in his fingers, counting the seconds, tack tack, letting time pass for the laughter to die out. His mother's was the most persistent. The short silence that followed made his ear drums hurt with the noise of the knife on the can, tack tack, and made the windstorm of his breathing sharper. He wanted someone to bring up something else to chase off his shame. Mizz Orchid jested:

"If Zé Luiz is the father, I'm the grandma!"

The derision blew up again, reinvigorated. An amused Mizz Orchid elbowed Big Foot's arm. Norato served another round of cornbread to finish off the guava paste, sliced transparently thin by the boyfriend of the sow. Sparrow stood up and announced that given the exemplary enthusiasm Mizz Orchid was showing to be part of the direct action and the loyalty her son Zé Luiz was showing her by not refusing to follow her, he himself had been filled with courage to join Big Foot's plan and would recruit allies at the camp. Norato abandoned for a few seconds his caustic tone to say that Mizz Orchid was not the dimwit he had imagined and, with a limp touch on the director's shoulder, he offered him his logistical support.

Goiabeira thought it his duty to present another argument against the initiative:

“From the ecological point of view, freeing a thousand pigs is a bad idea.”

Mizz Orchid, by this time feeling rather at ease, even under German’s scrutiny, leaned over Big Foot’s shoulder and said to him in a low voice, Environmentalist spoiling the party. Goiabeira heard her comment and saw Big Foot encourage the complicity of the debutante with a little pinch on her elbow. Somewhat irritated, he continued:

“Pigs are domesticated animals that adapt quite well to life in the wild. But the damn things eat everything and breed easily. The woods on this farm aren’t too extensive, and if they’re given over to a thousand pigs and their descendants, before long they’ll be devastated.”

Mizz Orchid waited for Big Foot to object. Unlike the loudmouth rebel she had met, he softened a melodious response:

“Right, Goiabeira is more than right. The wild animals that might eat the pigs and control their population were exterminated by the farmers long ago. That’s where volunteers for the direct action come in, see?, keeping the pigs they catch to satisfy their own hunger, helping to maintain the ecological balance of the woods, get it, Mizz Orchid?”

“Get it, Mizz Orchid?” repeated Norato with his typical acidity.

She got it. The activists involved in the operation would take a few pigs swollen with drugs for their families to eat. She envisioned herself unlocking the small metal crates described by Zé Luiz and prodding the animals caught in the shit out of the concrete building. She envisioned infected legs, squeals and terrified eyes falling all over each other. Disorientation and panic as they get out. And then the flight, flight from pain, flight from pain and beatings, flight from beatings and stabbings. Farther along, the woods would welcome those that escaped from the lynching.

“I reckon it’s a just act, the direct action to cut into Bezerra Leitão’s profit,” she said. “But I reckon it’s unjust to be

hurtin' the animals and takin' advantage of them to do justice for people. Me and my son gotta think all that over."

Big Foot feared losing the beginner's support, and with it that of Zé Luiz. In normal political circumstances, the pair's departure wouldn't make the slightest difference in terms of tactics and strategy. But at this stage the loss of almost fifty percent of the rebels would threaten, by the domino effect, the remaining almost fifty percent, made up of the new recruits Norato and Sparrow. The pro-anarchist collective the union director dreamed of would perish in the crib.

"You're in charge, Mizz Orchid," Big Foot melted. "As far as I am concerned, all the animals will go to the woods without even a scratch, done deal."

Norato and Sparrow protested, What the hell kind of pussyfooting was that?, The pigs were property of the capitalist and should be treated as such by the revolutionaries, Or did Mizz Orchid think that only rich folk can eat pork?, If she felt sorry for the pigs that was her problem.

"If activists rely on vegetarians," Norato philosophized, "the day of a-chicken-in-every-pot will never come."

German and Goiabeira also spoke up.

"Freeing a thousand pigs or so is not a viable option," said the former.

"Big Foot is manipulating Mizz Orchid with this story of liberating pigs," said the latter. "Bezerra Leitão will recapture all of them in the woods, one by one."

"And if he doesn't recover them, he'll raise and kill an equal number in their place," German added.

"But it's most likely he'll catch all the pigs," prophesied Goiabeira.

"Yes, he'll catch all the pigs," German reinforced.

"And he'll take Mortandela together!" Goiabeira finished.

The image of Mortandela condemned to death, crammed full of drugs, and immobilized in a metal crate, made Mizz Orchid feel a kind of pity that in softies like her is often accompanied by nausea. She controlled her queasiness and

reflected. No matter who won, rich or poor, the animals always ended up losing. But that didn't mean that she shouldn't do anything to help them. On the contrary, Mizz Orchid felt the need, an itching ardent desire, to do something. German and Goiabeira were pretty smart, but they weren't diviners. They weren't God. Only He could know what might happen with the pigs after the direct action. So, maybe Mizz Orchid could free one or two of them from the infernal path of lack, disease, mistreatment, and death leading from the crate to the slaughterhouse! The direct action proposed by Big Foot was making it possible for her to do that. Once freed, the pigs would have some chance; perhaps a few could hide so well in the woods that they'd never be captured. As prisoners, they'd have no chance. And if Bezerra Leitão should choose to raise new pigs in the crates instead of recapturing the freed ones, Mizz Orchid would find a way to liberate them too. Anything!, the ardent desire itched out loud. Anything except doing nothing.

Mizz Orchid reiterated to the rebels her support of the direct action and that of Zé Luiz. She'd take the precaution of keeping Mortandela and her group in the old pigpen, until Bezerra Leitão declared the recapture mission over, if in fact he decided to go that route. But there was a condition, Big Foot had to guarantee that no activist would take any animal. If the activists' problem was hunger, she explained, she knew how to solve it. In the first place, anyone who wanted to be part of the operation could have supper at Sparrow's camp, if they preferred.

Sparrow fumbled:

"Uhh, there's not much food, but as I said, there's always room for one more."

Mizz Orchid motioned him to shut up:

"Wait a sec, I ain't explained the rest yet. There's gonna be plenty of food in the camp. Listen here."

She continued explaining her idea. The operation would have to take place that week with the help of Mrs. Marcela's maids married to the men present. Because of the agreement with Bezerra Leitão's son, those cooks would be inventing all sorts of recipes with just vegetables for seven days. They would be

dealing with so much food that Mrs. Marcela, too proud to work in the kitchen, would lose control (if she had any at all) of the pantry and the refrigerator. The excess food would be kept for the hungry, in secret. If Mrs. Marcela suspected anything, the cooks would tell her a white lie. They would say that some recipes they had come up with had not worked out and that the food had ended up as pig slop. Every night Zé Luiz would load the extras onto a horse cart and take it to Sparrow's camp, where there were so many people in need.

Big Foot, Norato and Sparrow found Mizz Orchid's project to be quite sensible. German and Goiabeira, for their parts, considered it complicated and unworkable. They insisted it would be an inevitable failure, with punishment for those involved by the employer and or the police to follow, and, combined with the tendentious coverage of the events by the conservative media, it would mean a step backward for the movement. In a final attempt to dissuade the rebels, they suggested a meeting of their committee with the farmer's son, that Diogo fellow, who was studying something to do with forests in an American university, and who was vegetarian, or vegan, isn't that so, Mizz Orchid? Vegan, yes sir, confirmed Mizz Orchid. The fact that he was vegetarian, or better said, vegan, and that he studied nature, indicated, according to Goiabeira, that Diogo must have an enlightened view of environmental issues. At the meeting, the committee would endeavor to convince him to mediate the negotiations between the workers and his father, a task that he would carry out, in German's opinion, imbued with great sympathy, at the very least, for the causes the workers defended.

The proposal put forward by the environmentalist and the president of the union was rejected immediately, on the grounds that there was no difference — like father like son, chip off the old block — and that Diogo, belonging to the dominant class, would never defend the interests of the class antagonistic to his. That papa's boy might be studying forests, nature or whatever-the-fuck in the United States, but the truth of the matter was that the American imperialists weren't teaching him the subject with the well-being of the Brazilian population in mind, but rather aiming to control our national riches, our natural resources, and



our biodiversity. As for being vegan, this Diogo character was, above all, a representative of the elite; comrades German and Goiabeira should not forget, said Big Foot, that the motor of history is not vegetarianism, nor veganism, nor environmentalism, nor gay-ism and not whatever-the-fuck, but rather class struggle. Finally, as for the direct action meaning a step backwards for the movement, German and Goiabeira should look in the mirror, for it was they who were setting the movement back, first by delegating the power to decide to the boss and the government, and now by wanting to delay things even further, since they were trying to push an intermediary belonging to the bosses' class into the negotiations.

It was determined that Mizz Orchid's proposal for the direct action would be carried out by all present, except for Goiabeira and German. The pair promised not to interfere at any stage of the process. Mizz Orchid, Zé Luiz, Sparrow, Norato and Big Foot would have seventy-two hours to recruit volunteers. After that deadline, all supporters should be on alert to take action at any minute.

## Ti

Mizz Orchid tossed and turned on her meager mattress the rest of the night. For the first time since her husband had departed this world to watch over their two dead infants in limbo, she was sharing her bed and her body with someone else. That someone who was sharing her mattress and her body was the Orchid from before her brief stint cooking at the manor house of the farm. The old Orchid was fearful and ashamed of the new one. She couldn't stop griping about the outrageous one who had prodded the maids to insult Mrs. Marcela and had later stood shoulder to shoulder with the fancy-talking men at Norato's store. She said the new Orchid was impudent and worthless:

"Pig thief! Destroyer of buildings!"

The new one would not stand for insolence. But she knew that it's better to explain than to rail. And she tried to respond, in the language of Big Foot, one, two, three, as many times as necessary and workable on the bumpy ride of the night, that the direct action wouldn't steal from anybody or destroy anything, but rather confiscate from Bezerra Leitão what he himself had stolen from the pigs, the poor, and the woods. Their squabble was louder than the lullaby of the frogs and the crickets, not allowing the muscular body with earthen extremities to relax. It kicked, curled and stretched. The quarrelling voices only fell silent when day began to break. Mizz Orchid sat up in the bed, her legs in the way, the sheets twisted around them like rope.

"Mother, you were talkin' in your sleep," Zé Luiz related as she strained some coffee.

"What'd I say, boy?"

"I didn't really understand. I think you said Holy Hill. Then you said a bunch of words ending with -ing and -tion, kinda tongue twisted."

"Building, exploitation," she said quickly. She was relieved that her son hadn't said that she uttered the name German. "Action. Direct action. Operation."

“Careful, mother, not to say those things again. Not even in your sleep. What was agreed on at the meeting is secret.”

“Only a fool, son. I won’t tell no one no secret. Only folk we can trust, that might help in the operation. Like Vanessa.”

Zé Luiz recoiled.

“Are you nuts, mother?”

“Whattya mean, nuts?”

“Vanessa is the same breed as Bezerra Leitão, she belongs to the ruling class, she’s against us.” He wavered. “I mean, she’s a nice young lady, helpful.” He lowered his voice and his eyes. “A good-looking and elegant woman.”

“A rich girl, but simple ’n’ fair.” Mizz Orchid added.

Zé Luiz recovered his rebellious verve:

“Not fair at all. There’s no fairness when there’s rich folk and poor folk. Remember what Big Foot said about class struggle? Vanessa is our enemy.”

“Vanessa’s our friend and a friend of the pigs,” Mizz Orchid corrected. “She’s the one that had the idea to turn loose Mortandela and the others. It was her idea for me to get double pay at the big house.”

“That doesn’t mean that she’ll help us destroy her uncle’s property.”

“Leave her to me. I’ll explain just right that direct action business. If I got it, she’ll get it even more; she had schoolin’ and she done took a course to be a model. And she plain likes us. ’Member when you two would play together down by the riverside? Like brother ’n’ sister. Why for me she’s like a daughter.”

Zé Luiz sipped on his mug of coffee. He figured, So what if his mother, in her sentimental fantasies, regarded Vanessa like a daughter? Real life didn’t take into account Mizz Orchid’s feelings for Vanessa. In real life, they weren’t even distant relatives. For the sake of comparison, Zé Luiz’s girlfriend was Doralice, and that’s the cold hard truth. Did the fact that Zé Luiz thought of Vanessa as a kind of girlfriend of his, and the fact that

the guys considered Mortandela his girlfriend, change that reality? Not one bit.

“Vanessa ain’t your daughter, mother. She’s your superior. She’s from the class that abuses you.”

“Watch what you be sayin’ ’bout the young lady, don’t be rude now. Vanessa’s always been so nice to me. She ain’t never failed to come by for a visit. In my home, she ain’t never stood on cer’mony. She enjoys my food so much.”

Zé Luiz recognized, without saying anything, that if Vanessa should contribute to the operation, she would not be the first nor the last person of privilege to struggle at the side of the oppressed people. He imagined himself leading her to a liberating renewal, to the suppression of the social differences that almost always block sexual access for men like him to beauties like her. In the rubble of the building that they were planning to storm, he would show Vanessa where to step to avert injury to her delicate satin feet. He would calm her fears by absorbing on his lips, parched by the sun and the dust, the sweat of her lotion-scented brow. A thankful Vanessa would press her breasts against his hard chest and slip her tongue into his mouth. Doralice would catch them in the act of kissing and would be crazy jealous.

“Let’s discuss the issue at tonight’s meeting, mother,” Zé Luiz panted. “If the majority votes for your proposal to attempt to recruit Vanessa for the operation, then you can try.”

Mizz Orchid happily agreed. She had found it fun to participate in the debates and the decisions at Norato’s store, being courted by German and, on top of all that, helping those in need, whether people or pig folk. She looked forward to repeating the experience whenever she could.

She went to the chicken coop to gather eggs. Zé Luiz had to take them to the manor house every day as early as possible. Mrs. Marcela liked fresh eggs for breakfast. She would have Deuzicreide prepare two soft-boiled eggs to serve in two silver eggcups with a teaspoon of butter and a pinch of salt. Mizz Orchid came back to her house with ten eggs in the chicken-shaped wire basket that belonged to the lady of the manor house. Some of them were still as warm as the bodies they had just come

out of. Ten eggs, ten birds. Mrs. Marcela wouldn't be concerned. She knew how many hens Mizz Orchid took care of, and always made Zé Luiz explain when he took her the basket with less than ten units. Every weekend he would get back two eggs, the quota he was entitled to by agreement with Bezerra Leitão. Mizz Orchid handed the basket to her son, who left in the horse cart drawn by the enslaved Chuvisco.

She took care of the hens and cleaned the house. She fixed the vittles, rice with beans, corn. She grabbed a hoe in the shed and set off to weed the cornfield. Years earlier, she had defeated the weeds with herbicide, spraying or sprinkling granules. She could rest easy. She had time and energy to spare, to do something else, generally some extra task that the boss would come up with. But the weeds kept coming back stronger and stronger. No amount of herbicide could get rid of the damn weeds. With so much use of agrochemicals, the workers began to get sick. They suspected that it was killing birds and butterflies. The cornfield thinned out and looked shabby. Bezerra Leitão felt the excess of herbicide affect his bottom line and announced that he would stop purchasing the product for a while. He ordered the laborers to pull up the weeds by hand and hoe. Goiabeira told Zé Luiz that what had made the weeds strong like that was the herbicide itself.

Mizz Orchid had made it no further than Vanessa's Garden when she remembered that she wouldn't have to go to the cornfield. Someone else should be doing her work there, because she had agreed to cook vegan food at the manor house full time that week; but she had backed out of that agreement soon after beginning, and she knew that Bezerra Leitão hadn't had time and wasn't in the condition to revert to the old work arrangements in the cornfield. Mizz Orchid put the hoe away in the shed, returned to the house and plopped down her body of tree trunk and clay in the bed. She hadn't rested in the daytime since she was a girl. It was like she was loafing. Her closed eyes shut out the guilt, making believe that it was late at night.

She woke up when a car ran over her dreams. She jumped from the mattress and looked out the window to see a van park and unload four women, who proceeded toward the house. The

first was Vanessa. Behind her, two chubby ones and a pasty white one; it took Mizz Orchid a few seconds to recognize them.

"Anyone home? You have visitors!" Vanessa shouted, clapping her hands.

Mizz Orchid opened the door slowly. Antonia and her younger daughter Patricia, suffering from the heat in their sleeveless blouses, came arm in arm as if glued together by a moist bread dough. Hidden behind all of them, and under a hat with an immense brim, slid the American girl. At a distance she was already extending to Mizz Orchid the wide, anxious smile that had left the peasant a little apprehensive during Diogo's birthday dinner. She had a camera hanging from her neck. Mizz Orchid smoothed out what she was wearing. Her eyes quickly checked if the house was tidy; they measured the seats of the ratty straw chairs and the area of the mattresses on the narrow beds, calculating their ability to bear plenty of weight and to accommodate ample rears.

The little American spoke in a low voice with Antonia, who turned to Mizz Orchid:

"Megan wants to know if you would mind being photographed in front of your house."

"At your service," Mizz Orchid responded without much conviction. She stood before the hut and tried to arrange her garments, embarrassed to be in her fieldwork clothes still. She stood up straight and posed, semi-non-smile, arms pressed to her side, legs together. The American shifted left and right holding the camera in front of her, drrrrrr, advanced, drrrrrr, stepped back, drrrrrr. Mizz Orchid held the semi-non-smile. She bemoaned the setting that served as backdrop: walls full of holes and stained with mud. She asked herself what the foreigner could possibly see in such an ugly scene. Much obliged, Mizz Orchid, very tasty, she saw her say inside her avid smile.

The ladies went inside and remained standing. Vanessa was drawn to the chow:

"Mmm, nice eats, Mizz Orchid."

The hostess made like she hadn't heard and didn't ask if Vanessa would like some. She preferred the chagrin of not being

hospitable to that of displaying her meager meal to the other women. She barely had enough to offer to one person, let alone to Antonia and Patricia, who ate for ten. Antonia scolded her older daughter:

“Take your hands off Mizz Orchid’s lunch pail, girl. Didn’t I teach you any manners?”

Vanessa stepped away from the food to the relief of the involuntary hostess, who said diplomatically:

“Let the girl alone, Mrs. Antonia. Vanessa’s one of us. She’s like a daughter to me.”

“Thank you, Mizz Orchid, but we brought snacks,” responded Antonia. “And Marcela is expecting us for lunch.”

She took a big bag of potato chips and some cans of guaraná soda from Patricia’s backpack and commenced a picnic.

“Please sit down,” murmured the hostess timidly.

“No can do, we have to go,” the beauty advised. “Mother and Patricia must return to São Paulo today. We just dropped in to say hello to you and to see Vanessa’s Garden.”

The little foreigner said something to Antonia, who turned to Mizz Orchid:

“Megan is asking if she can take your picture inside here.”

Mizz Orchid consented and reset her semi-non-smile next to the table, drrrrrr, the wood stove, drrrrrr, the narrow bed, drrrrrr, sitting on the straw mat on the brick floor, drrrrrr, between the pictures of Jesus nailed on the cross and of Saint Sebastian riddled with arrows. At the peasant woman’s side, Vanessa, Antonia and Patricia held out to the camera their cans of guaraná, the luscious Brazilian soda, and drrrrrr.

They went outside. Mizz Orchid beamed. In fifteen minutes, at the latest, she could fall back into bed and lounge until she had to fix supper. Later, bristling fresh, she would go to meet German’s courteous remarks and the debates at the meeting. She went with the other women on the tour of the pigpen that Vanessa had had Zé Luiz transform into a garden. Plants were sprouting from small vases made of thick plastic bags, lined up

on a shelf of bricks and boards. They were identified with both their scientific and their common names, on tags Vanessa had made on Tiago the poet's computer. They would be transplanted to the soil as soon as Zé Luiz finished getting it ready.

"A little garden with nothing but plants from the Brazilian savanna," Vanessa informed her mother and sister. "It's going to be the prettiest thing in the world."

Megan took pictures. She copied some names from the tags into the notepad previously used to keep track of her observations labeled as pamphletarian and those of Diogo characterized as speciesist. *Calliandra dysantha*, *canela-de-ema*, *pacari*, *pau-terra*. *Palipalã*, Vanessa read out loud for Megan to repeat.

"Palipalan."

Mizz Orchid was amused by the little American's accent. She remarked that the girl tried to do her best and that she made a good match for Diogo, a very studious young man. Antonia translated the comment for Megan, inducing her teeth to overflow in smiles toward the peasant. Mizz Orchid felt uneasy.

Vanessa took leave of the hostess with a kiss on each cheek. Antonia and Patricia, with nothing more than a Thanks and See you next year Mizz Orchid. Megan waved goodbye at her with a limp hand, an uncertain smile, reluctant steps. Mizz Orchid fortified the farewell with a firm wave and a lively smile, and even said Until we meet again, Mizz Megan. She waited for the van to depart and then closed herself in the house. She had barely lain down when she heard the vehicle return. She opened the door. Vanessa and Megan came her way.

"Oh silly me, Mizz Orchid! Imagine, I forgot to give you a message from Aunt Marcela."

"At your service, dear."

"She says for you to hoe the cornfield."

Mizz Orchid tried to disguise her disappointment:

"But today there's already folks doin' my work in the field!"



"Aunt Marcela said that you should go help. That nothing grows more in the fields than weeds that have to be pulled up."

"And since when does Mrs. Marcela know anything 'bout workin' the fields?" said an irritated Mizz Orchid. "She's orderin' me to pick weeds cuz she wants to pick on me. But I know they don't need me in the cornfield. Today ain't no need for me."

Vanessa's eyes bulged out, her nostrils inflated, her tightened lips formed a beak. Mizz Orchid was startled. She had never seen a young lady as pretty as that turn so ugly, so swiftly.

"You are causing us a lot of headaches!" shouted Bezerra Leitão's niece. "You provoked the cooks! You upset the service in the big house! You disobeyed Aunt Marcela! You threw away the job that I got you, easy work with double pay! Are you going bananas?"

Mizz Orchid took the reprimand with her arms pressed to her sides. She glanced at the American girl, fearful she might photograph the scene. Megan had walked away and her back was turned. Vanessa continued:

"You left me in a very bad situation with Aunt Marcela, Orchid. You spoiled the reception that she prepared so carefully. And you even had the nerve to ask to settle up in front of the guests. Now you refuse to do your work in the fields! That's how you pay me back for how I always treated you and Zé Luiz?"

Mizz Orchid felt her mind go ablaze. Among the many debts that she owed her employers, she had just discovered one more. She had to pay for the good treatment received from Vanessa. Zé Luiz was right. Vanessa, Mrs. Marcela and Mr. Bezerra Leitão were all made from the same cloth. All from the class antagonistic to the working class, Big Foot would say. Out of spite, Mizz Orchid became even more resolute not to go to the cornfield that day. Should Mrs. Marcela discover her absence and demand an explanation, Mizz Orchid would say Well I done went, I sure did, if no one seen me it's cuz they got bad sight.

"You're the boss, Vanessa," she sighed, pretending. "I'll hoe them weeds."

Vanessa's eyes returned to their orbits. Her nostrils deflated. But her lips were still in a beak:

"From now on you can call me Miss Vanessa."

"Yes, Mizz Vanessa."

"Miss Vanessa and ma'am."

"Yes ma'am Mizz Vanessa."

"I have one more thing to tell you. But first I have to use the facilities."

She went into the cubicle of boards that housed the toilet and the bucket shower. Mizz Orchid heard her vomit. She thought Vanessa might be sick but didn't feel like coming to her aid. She wouldn't waste any of her almost-nothing on someone who got the most out of her much-more-than-a-lot.

Megan didn't need to understand Portuguese to perceive the humiliation to which Vanessa had subjected the peasant with the name of a flower. Feeling bad for her, she withdrew under her hat with a wide brim and hid half of her face behind her dark glasses. She would like to know how to mediate gently and kindly the relationship between the two women, advising Mizz Orchid to exercise her right to be treated with respect, and helping Vanessa to fulfill her duty to give such treatment. But, under the circumstances, she was incapable of effecting a reasonable intervention. Even so, she wouldn't fail to attempt whatever might be possible. Like a bird, she tried to learn to fly. She did what was within her reach. She forced a radiant smile to jump from her face and flap its wings all the way to Mizz Orchid's countenance.

The peasant woman got to thinking. If she knew how to speak American she would ask Megan the reason for so many smiles sent her way. It was not a smile to belittle others, she figured, it was a smile to exchange with pleasure and good will in happy situations. The girl surely felt happy when she was nice like that to poor folks. But she was cut from the same cloth as Diogo and Vanessa. When would she charge Mizz Orchid for all those smiles? What price would she ask? When would she trade the cute pleasing smile for an ugly bossy beak?

The door of the cubicle opened. Vanessa forced out her faded face, where two deep orbits spilled some eyes. A tired ghost, she wafted over to the employee:

“So, Orchid. The other thing I had to tell you is this. Megan is going to watch you working for a few hours.”

Bitch!, thought Mizz Orchid. Diogo’s American had just arrived on the farm and she was already showing what she came for. Wasn’t she going to be like an inspector for Mrs. Marcela? Too many alms, too many smiles, poor folk think it’s fishy. If Megan started charging for her smiles now, what all else might she be capable of against the workers after she got married to an heir? Big Foot knew what he was talking about at the meeting when he said that American imperialists cover all their bases in their determination to exploit the people and the natural riches of our Brazil. Mizz Orchid protested:

“But Vanessa...”

“Miss Vanessa,” beaked the beauty.

“But Mizz Vanessa, with so many things for the girl to see, so many places to go, she thought to watch me at work? Why?”

“She asked to. She’s curious to see how you live. I think she’s going to take a lot of pictures.”

“But what’s the big deal with pictures of a poor, dirty, sweaty old woman breaking her back in the fields? That’s some ugly doins’.”

“I don’t see the appeal either, Orchid. But foreign tourists like those things, our culture, both pretty and ugly things.”

Mizz Orchid lashed Megan with her eyes. It was the pasty white girl’s fault that she wouldn’t be able to get out of hoeing the cornfield. At least not for a few hours.

“How many hours is she gonna watch me?”

“Today? One, one and a half. Or two. I don’t know. Later on I’ll swing by there to take her back to the big house.”

“So let’s get goin’,” Mizz Orchid decided, anxious to finish her work, dispatch the American, and go back to bed.

She fetched her tool from the shed, followed by Megan, and took off toward the van. Antonia and Patricia were napping in their seats, their bread-dough arms hanging out the windows. The van started moving before Mizz Orchid got there. She shouted:

“Hey, Mizz Vanessa, ma’am, ain’t you gonna take me and Mizz Megan to the field?”

The beauty at the steering wheel stopped the vehicle and explained:

“Uncle Bezerra suggested I take Megan. But since Diogo said she wanted to share your real daily life in the field, I thought it was better for her to follow you on foot.”

Mizz Orchid waited for the car to leave and took a deep breath. She looked at Megan out of the corner of her eye and tossed her head to one side to indicate the way to the cornfield. Ten minutes later, the pair were marching in silence along the side of a dusty road.

Megan took a tube of sunscreen from her backpack and rubbed lotion into her exposed skin, reinforcing the layer she had applied in the morning. She offered some to the peasant, together with her smile. A serious Mizz Orchid nodded no. Megan was afraid that the admirable DaVincian might be declining not just her lotion but her smile as well. She felt out of sorts because she had entered the other woman’s world in a clumsy and arrogant way. She would like to make her understand how much it displeased her to play the role of the invasive observer of that primitive yet dignified life, marked in every aspect by the contempt of the powerful. She wished it were possible for the two of them, in the short space of a week, to share the differences in culture and class that guided them and that could complement and enrich their respective experiences, instead of driving them apart. She thought that despite her illiteracy, Mizz Orchid would likely be quite receptive, due to her innate veganism, to learning philosophical concepts capable of broadening her animal awareness at an abstract level; if she were armed with these logical tools, reflected Megan, the peasant would have great potential to become an activist educator, who could bring together supporters of abolition of the use of nonhumans,

promoting and helping to establish veganism in her community. Ah, she was so sorry that she was unable to present in Portuguese, to the lady with the name of a flower, the guiding theory of the cause!

In the scrawny cornfield still feeling the effects of poisoning, Mizz Orchid had to hand the hoe over to the foreigner twice. That's because Megan had asked to help her do the weeding, showing her perfect teeth from ear to ear and extending her hands greasy with lotion toward the tool. Mizz Orchid's initial impulse was to respond with a scowl and shake her head no. But her muscles, punished by the turbulence of the sleepless night, ceded to the urge to relax on the ground, and Megan assumed the responsibility of extracting three robust tufts of wild grass. Upon seeing the rich heir's girlfriend give her all to do a peasant's work, Mizz Orchid felt the excitement of subversion and the joy of power. She would ask her for the camera to take her picture if she were not overcome with sloth, stretched out between stalks of corn and a few of beans. She had to fight back sleepiness. What if Vanessa showed up early and caught her snoring on top of the weeds! But Megan got blisters on her palms and gave the hoe back before completing her job.

What was really funny was to see the American girl save the worms exposed by the hoeing. Mizz Orchid's first impulse was to belittle her, imitating Norato with a sardonic smile and nodding no. But then she thought it right to move the little critters squirming in the open air to a hoed area and cover them with some dirt.

"Worms are also God's creatures," Mizz Orchid smiled at Megan, for the first time. The American girl quickly framed her smiling face in the camera, she wanted to record for posterity the great event, but Mizz Orchid was faster: she frowned, and drrrrrr.

Meen-yo-kah. The peasant made fun of the way Megan said the word for worm, *minhoca*. Then she taught her other words, more to amuse herself with her accent than to increase her knowledge of Brazilian culture and the natural riches coveted by the imperialists. Two hours later, one eye on her watch and another on the road, Megan practiced out loud the vocabulary she

had acquired based on the dialect and the constructivist conception of her teacher:

“*Erva daninia*, weeds. *Mee-ah-ral*, cornfield. *Grau de mio*, kernel of corn. *Grau de fey-jow*, a bean.”

Mizz Orchid made fun under her breath. Then her mind turned to Vanessa, who was about to take Megan back, and she filled with joy at the prospect of illicit afternoon rest. The hoe rose more easily, and with single strokes she fished out weeds by the roots. The American girl couldn’t quite pronounce the *-ão* in the language of the Brazilians. Who knows, some day Mizz Orchid the teacher might teach her a few *-ão* words in the language of the meetings: *reunião*, *ação direta*, *Alemão*. Meeting, direct action, German. Tee hee hee, Mizz Orchid mocked.

Two more hours went by. Sitting on the ground, Megan felt the heat of the sun bake her nose in cream of sunscreen. She applied an extra layer of protection on her skin, taking care not to burst the blisters on her palms, and offered the tube to Mizz Orchid. The peasant rejected it; she was cross:

“Vanessa done forgot you. That head’s full of air, God help me.” And, as Megan did not understand Brazilian, she added: “Serves you right, now you’re planted there. You’ll grow roots like a stalk of corn.”

She was hungry and thirsty. She had not brought water or food, certain she would be back home early. At least she had been able to take it a little easier and get less tired, posing for photos, teaching words, supervising the safe return of dislodged worms to the subterranean world. There was even a moment when she sort of enjoyed being there, when the American girl showed her images in the camera of her mother with her black cats, and taught her the names of some of them, with the sounds *do re mi fa so la ti*. But even that pleasure soon went bad, because Mizz Orchid didn’t like black cats. *Te esconjuro!*, she exclaimed as if exorcising the cats, and the daffy little foreigner thought she was trying to teach her another word.

It did occur to Mizz Orchid to walk Megan back to the manor house. Long walk! But what if the van and Vanessa finally showed up on the dusty trail that cut the farm in two? It was

better to wait. She looked for two early-blooming ears of corn and sat down for an improvised lunch next to Megan, who tried to crack a big smile. But it came out small like kernels of premature corn.

"Where's all that smilin' now, you pest?" a vengeful Mizz Orchid said.

An hour later, Megan stretched out on the ground of the cornfield to see if she could catch a few winks to shorten the waiting time. She used pantomime to suggest to Mizz Orchid that she too take a rest. The peasant responded with her own mime, pointing to the camera and shaking her finger to say no. Megan raised her thumb to confirm and put the camera away in her backpack to avoid mistrust. Mizz Orchid did her the favor of smiling and made herself comfortable on the tilled earth. But she couldn't relax. Every so often she would jump up, frightened by a loud rustling of plants in the wind, or by the sound, real or imaginary, of a car engine in the distance, and quickly she would get back to hoeing, fearful someone might arrive right then. Megan could not sleep either. The sunscreen had been diluted in the perspiration around her eyelashes, and had blended with lubricating tears, invading and burning her eyes. The more it burned, the more it teared up, and the more it teared up, the more the lotion diluted and corroded the cornea. A secretion trickled down her nose. She sniffled. Poor thing, thought Mizz Orchid, she's so upset she's crying. And she got mad at Vanessa. Lack of consideration, forgetting a girl with cancer in the field, the whole day, with no water or food! Megan seemed to be a nice girl. Didn't she feel pity even for worms? If Mizz Orchid could speak American, and if Megan weren't of the same stripe as Vanessa and Bezerra Leitão, Mizz Orchid might even try to recruit her for the liberation of the pigs.

Near the manor house, sitting atop Trotamundos, Bezerra Leitão told Diogo that he would swear on the Bible that his horses lived like royalty and that they just didn't like standing around doing nothing. That they didn't suffer when they were used for eight hours in a row to train rodeo riders, and much less when ridden for eight seconds during the actual rodeo. That they were so used to working hard all day pulling carts and getting

after cattle, in the sun, rain, cold or heat, that for them to stroll around the farm, with all their gear on and a man on their backs, was nothing short of a party.

"You can mount, no problem," the owner of the farm said to Diogo, through the cigarette hanging from his lips. "Trotamundos and Unicorn are no more bothered by saddles and reins than you are by your binoculars and backpack."

From beneath ample eyelashes, Unicorn looked at Diogo with two spheres brimming with chestnut curiosity. He exhaled sultry air from his investigative nostrils. Diogo noted scars on his head, his neck, his belly.

"Did spurs cause these injuries?" he asked his father.

Bezerra Leitão planted seeds of reticence in the conversation:

"Horses are strong animals..."

"And are you sure we can't go in the car?"

"I'm sure. Cars can't go just anywhere. Let's go, son, let's take these two creatures for a walk!"

Diogo hid his irritation and mounted Unicorn. Atop Trotamundos, Bezerra Leitão wheezed his chest in a laugh. The four mammals began to stroll around the farm together.

The heir turned his eyes away from Unicorn's scars toward the landscape. He sought out the areas with the vegetation of his childhood to abandon there his uncomfortable feelings of pity. He would erase from his mind the marks of panic and torture on the skin of the submissive slave that the rodeo gang forced to be rebellious in the confines of the arena.

The French-colonial style manor house, nested in a garden of native plants where Mrs. Marcela had neatly laid down an impeccable carpet of grass, was as lovely as twenty years ago. Bats, a couple of owls, a toucan, and even a giant armadillo crossed through the garden from time to time. That little biome of the savanna and the Atlantic rain forest was an oasis in the desert that now formed almost all the Fazenda Mato Grosso. It seemed shielded from the dusty sky by the branches of a centuries-old cariniana tree, which spread above the tallest trees. And it seemed



to be protected from the polluted waters of the Guarani Aquifer by the grounds embroidered with flowerbeds. But before long it would cease to pulsate. They had cut its veins and arteries. The Atlantic rain forest is almost extinct and the savanna will be dead in thirty years, warned experts. Diogo's uncomfortable feelings once again showed on Unicorn's scars.

They had been open wounds, those scars, caused by the rider's spurs repeatedly digging into the skin, and they had been rubbed with turpentine and pepper for the horse to buck in pain in the rodeo (as if the crushing pressure of the flank strap weren't painful enough). Unicorn's scars opened wounds in Diogo's eyes. He told his father that he needed to look at the waters of the river.

They rode up a hill of sandy earth spiked with skeletons of trees. At the top, through the hanging dust, Diogo could pick out parts of the property with his binoculars: some corrals and dying pastures where Bezerra Leitão had begun to implement his concrete therapy; the building with the concentration camp for pigs, which the farm owner preferred to call intensive animal farming; the woods where spotted jaguars and maned wolves had once roamed, now shrunk to a mere three percent of the area of the farm; a few anemic houses loaned to workers who lived on the land; and the cornfield where Megan was supposed to be interacting with the peasant woman described by Vanessa as a vegan. The narrow dirt road wormed into some parts. The muddy river widened farther in the distance. A mutant stain was crossing its waters.

"The herd," said Bezerra Leitão. "Zé Luiz is herding the cattle to a pasture on the other side."

"But the river is so shallow!" Diogo was amazed.

"Shallow as hell," his father confirmed. "Just a little rain makes it overflow. All around it there's erosion."

The waters of the Perobinha do Campo River had already lost their crystal-clearness when the young boy Diogo would swim in them. They were muddy because of the constant passing of the herds of cattle from the region's farms. Still Diogo managed to characterize the river of his childhood as a process of nature, forged in the evolution and patience of millions of years.

But now what the student of forestry was seeing through his binoculars was a disease on the epidermis of the planet, caused by the culture of meat. In a few decades, the river had become a flow of mud, drugs, and waste. It was suffocating beneath the land fallen from the shores that had been trampled and flattened by the hooves of cattle. It was a running sore. It burned the eyes, like turpentine and pepper. Diogo lowered his binoculars. Next to him, Trotamundos shooed flies with his tail.

“Father, promise me you won’t have any more rodeos on the farm.”

Bezerra Leitão wheezed his hearty laugh:

“That’s my son Diogo! Always giving other people ideas.”

“Influence of my godmother Antonia, father.”

“Antonia won’t quit. She didn’t rest until she succeeded in taking you to São Paulo to go to school. She thought her godson had a genius IQ.”

“I can’t complain about my teen years at her house.”

The father coughed his laughter through puffs of smoke:

“Nor about the rotating husbands?”

Diogo chortled:

“The comings and goings of husbands was the funniest part.”

Bezerra Leitão prolonged the laughter of his tired lungs. He dropped his shoulders on his tits and belly, relaxing in the hard saddle, cigarette drooping from his lips. He thought it might be time to inform Diogo of his intention to retire and, as agreed upon by Marcela, to hand over the four farms to him.

“Father, you haven’t made the promise.”

“Which promise?”

“Promise that you will stop the rodeos.”

The patriarch straightened his back, held in his gut:

“Why are you picking on rodeo, my son? People schooled in the city, like you, are prejudiced against country culture. You think rodeo is violent. On the contrary, it’s a fine, elegant sport.

It's a beautiful cowboy tradition. You want me to stop supporting a cultural tradition? Frankly, Diogo, you hardly seem like a university student."

"Humans also have the tradition of clitoral mutilation in certain parts of Africa," the forestry student said, sounding more aggressive than he had intended to. "Just that clitoridectomy is a cruel tradition that denies women their right to physical integrity, to say the least. And all traditions like that have to change."

Bezerra Leitão was disturbed, clitoridectowhat?, he lit another cigarette with the one already going. No son of his had ever spoken to him in such terms. Clitoris! Africa! Where was that boy going? He was trying to confuse his father.

"Don't change the subject, my son," he pulled himself back together. "I'm talking about cowboys in the arena and you come at me with African ladies with their... their... their privates cut off. I don't know if that's true, I never came across a woman like that. But one thing I'm sure of: it's easier for me to cut off my own private parts than to end the rodeo."

"Then at least stop using Unicorn and Trotamundos for training and tournaments. Come to think of it, why don't you give the two their freedom? And not replace them with others, to be clear."

"Give who their freedom?" wondered the patriarch, thinking that Diogo was referring to some of his men.

"Unicorn and Trotamundos. Why don't you let the two of them run free on the farm?"

"Because they'd get distressed, not knowing what to do with their time," Bezerra Leitão resisted, billowing smoke. "I can think over taking them out of the rodeo. But no guarantees. Unicorn and Trotamundos are two of my bravest horses."

"By brave you mean bucking like crazy because of panic and pain," a stern Diogo corrected.

Bezerra Leitão hacked. He had not gone to college. He had not even finished what was called, in his day, junior high school. He had never had a politically correct girlfriend, like the little American. But he was more cultured than his son supposed.

"So let's look at this thing from the anthropological angle," he proposed. "The rodeo rider functions like the bullfighter over there in Spain. They're a symbol."

"Yeah, a symbol of human arrogance and perversity," said Diogo, getting off his horse.

"They're a symbol of man's power over nature, my son." He saw Diogo get their bottles of water and a gourd from his backpack. "Listen here. Nature needs to be controlled. If not, there's no civilization, only chaos and anarchy. And the people in control are powerful people, understand? People with authority." Diogo calmed Unicorn's thirst with a gourd of water. His father increased the volume of his voice, professorial. "Breaking horses, for instance. What is the great lesson for humanity in the art of breaking horses? The great lesson is that if man is able to show his authority, he can teach even an irrational animal to obey. All that business of meanness, flank strap, spurs, whether it's cruel or not, is not as important as it seems, see? Those things are only small details when you think big, you aim high, you think in terms of anthropology, of cultural tradition, of lessons for humanity as a whole. Do you understand that, my son?"

Diogo offered the water gourd to Trotamundos.

"There's one thing I don't understand, father. Why keep a cultural tradition of devastation and domination, if we can create another one, of respect and harmony?"

The owner of the farm dismounted and stepped away to urinate. He didn't intend to waste much time or too many words on the defense of domesticating nature and animals. Diogo could kick his legs as much as he wanted against civilized practices that he considered unjust. Sooner or later he'd grow tired of complaining about reality and he'd accept it as it is: a system made of a few strong ones and a lot of weak ones, where the strong ones are responsible for what is advanced in the world, and the weak ones for what is backwards.

"At your age I also thought like you," he lied, returning to the saddle. "But if things were like in the dreams I had as a young man, men would still be at the same level as animals, living in forests and wearing fig leaves. God put cowboys on the Earth to

vanquish nature and bring progress to humanity. If progress were wrong, human beings wouldn't have succeeded in bettering the world with septic tanks, antibiotics and plasma television, for example."

Diogo put away the two empty bottles and the gourd in his backpack. The patriarch complained:

"You didn't have to waste our water. The horses are accustomed to being thirsty. They're fonder of working when they know that they'll be rewarded with water when the job is done."

The horseshoes worn by Unicorn and Trotamundos crumbled the sun-toasted cow patties that were burning the fuzz of the soil. The four mammals were engulfed in a swarm of botflies determined to plant larvae on their skin. Bezerra Leitão tried to shoo the insects waving his arms, Shoo, you damn flies, you hellish pests. The voices of the cows and the oxen came from all sides, deep, plaintive, dusty. Those of the hogs remained locked with their despair in the mute concrete building. At the top of the hill, Bezerra Leitão admired the work that had resulted from his triumph over nature. He filled his chest with air. The whistling of his own lungs gave him an ovation.

"I still want to see this farm be like those of the Center West," he dreamed. "Ahh, the Center West! That's looking real fine. Not too long ago it was nothing but jungle, wild beasts and Indians. Today it's prosperous and the envy even of the Southeast. There's so much intensive animal farming and so much post-farmgate business that I can't keep up with it anymore."

"What's that, post-farmgate business?" Diogo groaned, ever more desolate.

"Well, the word says it all. Slaughterhouse, packing plant, tanning factory, butcher shop, those kinds of things. In the last five years I've opened several. I've even opened a soap factory. I can't keep track of how many thousands of jobs I've created in the Center West. Nor how much foreign-exchange credits I've generated for this country." He pointed straight up and inserted a proviso: "But I didn't achieve all that by myself.

Let's be fair to Holy Hill, who invested, and the governors, who gave their support."

A mocking wind rubbed gaseous excrement in Diogo's nose. The odor emanated from the feedlot. The patriarch inhaled deeply, as far as the bronchial tickling would allow:

"Mmm, nice smell! Only a farmer can understand the aroma of cow dung. Do you know how many head stay in the feedlot, eating corn and enriched rations, every year, this time of the year? Fifty thousand! Fifty thousand hardy eaters, with nothing to do but fill their bellies."

Diogo added it up. Fifty thousand times ten kilos of excrement a day equals five hundred tons of crap. Five hundred tons of shit of prisoners of a single species, in a single day of one season of each year of a business begun two centuries ago. And on a single farm.

"First-rate rations!" Bezerra Leitão continued. "But Holy Hill's veterinarian is such a perfectionist that he still recommends combining them with some stuff that makes the animals gain weight more quickly."

"Antibiotics?"

Bezerra Leitão played dumb:

"I'm not privy."

"Yes, antibiotics. Mixed into rations that have absolutely nothing to do with the diet of a herbivore."

"Soy rations. Isn't soy good? Don't vegans eat things made of soy? Don't you love tofu?"

"Yes, but cows are born to eat grass. Holy Hill's rations are made from soy, rejected animal parts from all over the place, and chicken droppings."

Bezerra Leitão was indignant:

"That's absurd! You're roundly mistaken, young man! If that's what they're teaching you at the university, you can abandon your studies and I'll give you my full support. You can do like your father, who never needed a diploma to do business." He dragged on the cigarette and continued to speak, his cough stuck in anger in his throat: "Just follow me to the feedlot. I insist

on eating a gourd of rations in front of you just to prove to you how confident I am in the product.”

“No need to go so far, father. Think about this. The so-called advanced countries in Europe are giving up on intensive farming and agrochemicals to invest more in organic production. Of course everything is still quite bad for animals in Europe. Animals should not be enslaved in any way whatsoever, even if raised free range. But I’m telling you this just for you to see that what you consider progress here is seen as backwards there.”

“That’s what Goiabeira said in the *Correio Perobinha-campense*.”

“Who?”

“A trouble maker environmentalist. He said that Holy Hill is investing so heavily in South America and Asia because it’s looked upon with suspicion in the First World. But I know that’s a lie spread by rich countries. They don’t want to see growth in middling countries like ours.”

“Growth? It’s temporary growth, father. And predatory, at the cost of disrespect to animals and irreparable damage to the...”

Coff coff eeeeehhmm, Bezerra Leitão didn’t intend to hear the rest and turned up the volume of his wheezing cough coff eeeeehhmm coff eeeeehhmm coff. Diogo insisted:

“Much more energy is consumed than is produced. The production of a kilo of meat, for instance...”

Coffcoff eeeeehhmm coffcoff eeeeehhmm.

“...uses ten times more energy...”

Coff coff coff eeeeehhmm coffcoffcoff.

“...than that of a kilo of grain.”

Bezerra Leitão collected the mucus in his throat, spat it out, wiped his mouth off with his wrist. He lacked the breath to cough anymore. He was obliged to swallow the conclusion of the speech.

“It’s a waste for us to feed plants to the farm animals and then eat those animals, father. Instead of raising animals, we should eat plants straightaway. Look at beans, for example, a

perfect little plant. It has all the good things that meat does and none of the bad ones.”

“For me, beans are poison,” said the patriarch, pressing his gut. “I get gas.”

“Try mixing with some brown rice...”

Bezerra Leitão interrupted him, annoyed:

“I take some medicine for gas that works like a charm. And if I have any health problems because of meat, I’ll get treatment. If I have to have a bypass operation, I’ll get as many as I need. Other day on TV I saw where biotechnology is creating a pig with fat that’s good for human cholesterol. That’s progress. Man felt cold, so he invented coats. He got hot, so he invented air conditioning. Scientists are always snooping around, until they find solutions for all sorts of problems. My pastures are exhausted? I build concrete corrals for the cattle and feed them rations by Holy Hill. That greenhouse effect business is wrecking the planet? Humanity can get on rockets and move to another one. And so it goes. Even this leg of mine, which was paralyzed by some badly cooked pork, I could get it fixed with prosthetics if I took it into my head to do so. I just keep dragging the thing around because I’m a lazy bastard.”

He suggested they return home. He noted, grouchy, that they could have stayed out longer had Diogo not wasted their water on the horses, and that just the thought of perhaps having to go thirsty pissed him off. Unicorn and Trotamundos carried the humans down the hill, their horseshoes pulverizing the impermeable soil, a tomb for the scarce sprouts and seeds that had escaped the appetite and trampling of the herds.

Bezerra Leitão dragged on his cigarette and mulled things over. Maybe Marcela was right to question the choice of Diogo as heir to all their rural domains. Perhaps God, already satisfied with the two centuries of contributions that his family had made to the powerful culture of barbecue, rodeo, leather and tallow for soap, was sending the patriarch signs that he had done enough. Those indications came to him in the form of sons given to the frailty of arts and veganism. The farm owner’s heart bled. Maybe he should leave his four properties and the post-farmgate



businesses to his niece Vanessa. She had chosen the country life, she treated Marcela like a mother, and she appreciated like nobody else a good rare veal. At the rodeo, riding Tom Cruise, she drove the horse and the fans crazy. It was just a matter of time before she'd marry some entrepreneur in the cattle or swine business. And even if that smart customer ended up taking possession of everything, at least he would keep alive the Bezerra Leitão legacy. The patriarch felt a drop of moisture under his eye. Sweat, he thought. The mere notion of his family's two centuries of work slipping through the fingers of a woman — not even a daughter but a niece! — into the hands of a stranger was enough to suffocate him.

“Father, are you OK?”

The owner of the farm was surprised to find himself bending over the horse's neck, his hand on his chest. He sat up.

“I'm OK. I'm a little short of breath. It's all this dust.”

“If I were you, father, you know what I would do to improve the air on the farm? An agroforest.”

Bezerra Leitão panicked with the second part of the word, forest. But the imperative to nurture his faint flame of hope with respect to Diogo forced him to consider just the first part, agro. He pushed back his cowboy hat and showed himself to be all ears to any proposal of his son's that might involve at some level an idea, even if a vague idea, to make use of the land — even if it were a bad idea.

“At first, it would be an organic agroforest, father. No synthetic fertilizer, pesticide or herbicide.” Bezerra Leitão foresaw trouble with Holy Hill. He cleared his throat and pulled his hat back down. “First, I'd have to restore the soil's health. I think I'd use powdered rock, green manure, and compost of fermented straw with cow dung. Have you ever heard of green manure, father?”

Skeptical, the patriarch shook his head no. It was clear to see that the agroforest would take decades to be ready. By then, as the firstborn Tiago liked to say, not even the Amazon forest would still be standing. And Diogo thought that he was going to save the planet with that green manure of his...

"Green manure, father, are little plants that take nutrients from the air to the soil. Just taking a quick look, I think that crotalaria would work well as green manure. But I'm not sure. I'd have to consult the laborers. Their empirical knowledge is as important as mine, which is very theoretical."

Bezerra Leitão lit another cigarette. Crotalaria. Empirical knowledge. You could tell that the school of forestry Diogo was attending was teaching him something. But the boy's project sounded worse and worse. Consult laborers? It had been a long time since they knew anything about fieldwork. Now, apart from corn, cattle and hogs they only knew one thing: how to fill their own bellies and complain without reason.

"In this restored soil," continued Diogo, "I'd plant trees and bushes that like sun and grow quickly. The castor-oil plant, for example. And the *sibipiruna*. I don't know, I'd have to research others. I'd ask the workers for suggestions..."

"The white bush!" exclaimed Bezerra Leitão, jealous of the peons. Who better to give Diogo suggestions than his own father?

"In the shade of those trees and bushes, I'd plant others and I'd grow my combined crops. I could plant coffee, for example, mixed with some *pitanga* berries, *jabuticaba* trees, some cedars, papaya trees..."

"Beans, squash, corn," Bezerra Leitão added.

"Maybe quince, maté. Who knows. The more different species thriving together, the better for all the people and animals involved." His eyes tried to attract the patriarch's from under the cowboy hat. They were not successful. "Crops could be produced with lower costs and less work. And with no poisons, father."

Bezerra Leitão was not thrilled with the plans put forth. He was unsure of mid-term and long-term results. He didn't like to take risks. Lower profits were out of the question. He feared retaliation from Holy Hill. He thought it was dangerous to consult workers, to be seen as weak or ignorant. He'd give up on the idea of favoring Diogo, if it weren't for one small detail, a lone promising item of the project that, from his perspective, was a failure from the outset:

“Cow dung, my son? Was that what you said you were going to use to make compost and revitalize the land?”

“Yes I did. With so many cattle here, and with ten kilos of shit daily from each head, one thing there’s no lack of is cow dung.”

“Watch your mouth, boy,” the owner of the farm said just for the sake of saying. Deep down, he enjoyed a spark of joy. He lit another cigarette with the one that was only half smoked. “Ahh, so you do believe in using animals on the farm!”

“Not exactly, father...”

The patriarch interrupted him, radiant:

“For a second I thought that my favorite heir was capable of committing the crime of betraying the family’s tradition of animal agriculture! Get off that nag, my son, and give your father a hug!”

He got off Trotamundos and opened his arms to Diogo. The young man jumped from Unicorn and weakly embraced him, feeling his father’s chest whistling against his own.

“Favorite heir, father? Me?”

Still facing Diogo, Bezerra Leitão stepped back, his hands on his son’s shoulders.

“And who else could it be? Your brothers are all softies. If it were up to me, I’d disown all three of them. Marcela won’t let me.” He let go of his son’s shoulders and took a drag of his cigarette. “Their inheritance will be much smaller than yours, I guarantee that.”

“Isn’t it kind of early to be talking about inheritance?”

Bezerra Leitão didn’t hear him. He growled:

“Even then, they’re going to get much more than they deserve. Stocks. Money invested in Brazil, in Switzerland and in the Bermudas. The money from some real estate that your mother and I are selling.” He deepened his eyes, he enlarged his voice. “I know those spendthrifts will burn it up in a minute, on films, poems and gondola rides in Venice with decadent Milanese aristocrats. But I swear, Diogo, on all the cow-dung compost that restores the earth: those good-for-nothings won’t get their hands

on the farms and post-farmgate business!” He blew smoke on his escort of flies. They flew away for a few seconds, soon to return to reconstitute the veil in motion around him. He cleared his throat, comforting his cough. “I’m starting to get ill and I need to rest. I want to spend my old age sitting back and watching Marcela eat cheese-and-guava-paste roly-poly in front of a giant 3D plasma TV, next to an indoor swimming pool with a waterfall imitating an Aztec temple, in the mansion that we’re going to buy in the Morumbi district in São Paulo.” He warmed his voice, confidential: “It’s time for me to pay some attention to your mother. She wants to move to the capital as soon as possible. She wants to hire a bilingual butler trained abroad and a team of ten maids to entertain the high society of São Paulo. She’s sure she’ll be recognized by the social columnists there.” He slumped his shoulders, embittered in a moment of defeat. “Poor girl, she’s so careful with everything! It’s my fault that she never got a kudo in the *Correio Perobinha-campense*. The local press never liked me...”

“Oh, father, don’t say that,” said Diogo, not really knowing what to say.

Bezerra Leitão left sadness and intimate revelations aside. He opened his voice wide again:

“Tell me something, son. You had classes in forest management at school, didn’t you?”

“Yes I did.”

“Well then!” the farm owner shouted. “With a little practice and some help from my team of executives, you’ll be a whiz in management of...” he slowed the rhythm of his speech to stress the importance of the words, “the four farms and the post-farmgate businesses that I’ll put in your name, as soon as you graduate!”

Diogo’s hands froze.

“Father, I-I-I don’t know...”

The patriarch refused to take into account any sign of hesitation on his son’s part:

“You’re still young. Your mind still works, unlike mine these days. Ever since I partnered with Holy Hill, I can barely

keep up with the growth of staff and profits. Hard-working, competent and responsible as you are, you'll handle the business with one hand behind your back."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, father," a petrified Diogo murmured, the news trying to learn to fly in his mind, a bird going in circles.

The two embraced. The patriarch inflicted exultant pats on the back of his chosen one. He let him know that he himself would announce his decision to the other sons when the time was right, and he mounted Trotamundos. Diogo got up on Unicorn. The legacy burnt the pats on his back, wounds rubbed with turpentine and pepper.

As soon as they and a few dozen insects resumed their journey, Diogo recalled Lacan. He felt it was urgent that he consult his most recondite oracle, that he connect with his deepest truths, those most adverse to the artifices of human civility, and that he orient himself by his most intimate inspiration made matter and exposed to the world. He looked with discouragement at the empty landscape. He lamented not having access at that moment to a toilet on which he could sit and reflect — with the privacy, peace and quiet he was accustomed to enjoying during the act of defecation — on his new status and on the devastating responsibility that came with it. He told his father of his urgent need. Bezerra Leitão remembered that the woods weren't too far away and he accompanied his son there.

They tied the horses to a branch of a *tabebuia* near the gate and entered on foot. A barbed-wire fence protected the woods from the appetites of the cattle but did not impede the passage of animals with a vocation to dig. Bezerra Leitão noticed a big hole under the fence. Wild boar, he reckoned. Too bad he hadn't brought his rifle. But it was OK, it wouldn't be so much fun to hunt in the company of a son who felt pity even for riding horses.

Diogo hid behind the proverbial bushes and proceeded to communicate with the emissary of his inner core. The patriarch sauntered away, penetrating the vegetation, breaking small branches around him to mark a return trail. He hadn't passed through those parts for a long while. He smelled plants

transpiring, he heard insects whispering and birds gossiping. The woods were pleasurable. He decided that he would come back to visit to shoot at some animals, after Diogo returned to the United States. He felt a little foolish to be maintaining idle a spread of land of that size, equivalent to two hundred and fifty soccer fields. Maybe it would be more worthwhile to clear it and replace it with new concrete buildings for livestock than to wait for his heir to take possession of it still intact and expand it into an agroforest. He would have to consult his wife about that matter. His niece, Vanessa, had insisted on the preservation of the area for a future long-term project to catalogue all the species of plants there. Mrs. Marcela liked that idea, she thought it was elegant to conserve an entire forest just for a lovely young lady, a member of the family, to be able to practice her hobby there.

The noise of a branch breaking not too far away caught Bezerra Leitão's attention. The woods that gave him pleasure frightened him as well. He climbed a tree and saw a group of pigs. They seemed to be barrows and they were adding bush branches to a collective nest. A little beyond the nest, a sow and eight piglets were investigating the ground with their noses. She must be sensing smells coming from down to seven meters beneath the ground, thought the farmer, who knew something of the animals' talents; and since pigs can also smell things ten kilometers away on the surface, the group must already have detected him as well as Diogo, Unicorn and Trotamundos. Still, they didn't seem to be concerned. They must be used to men and horses. Bezerra Leitão got down from the branch and returned to the thicket where his heir had just conferred with the ambassador of his human reconditeness. He proposed that they drop by another place before going back to the manor house.

Nose baked by excessive sun and eyes reddened by sunscreen, Megan trotted along the road behind Mizz Orchid. The peasant woman was exhausted. But the rage that stirred her blood fueled her rapid military-like march. At that pace they'd arrive at the manor house in an hour. And with God's help maybe some member of the Bezerra Leitão family would thank her for

having taken care of the American girl by driving her back to her hut.

“An an’,” Mizz Orchid taught Megan when the latter pointed to the teeny tiny burdened individuals which she was trying not to step on. And at the student’s request: “Fly,” she named those that Megan was brushing away with delicate movements so as not to swat them. “Shwarm. Botfly.” Megan pointed to the omnipresent element in the area and a respectful Mizz Orchid taught her: “Bovine feces.”

Ten minutes later, a colored stain sprouted from the dust of the road. Megan pointed at it, filled with joy.

“The van!” a festive Mizz Orchid taught her.

The van sped in its earthen cloud to where the pedestrians were and braked to a bucking stop. From within emerged precipitously the niece of Bezerra Leitão.

“Silly me!” she gasped, slapping herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand. “Forgive me, Megan. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I escorted mother and Patricia to the highway, and then helped Father Cristiano to get his campaign to spay and neuter dogs and cats started. All of a sudden, it dawned on me, I shouted: I forgot Megan! The priest was even startled.” She opened the doors. “Get in too, Mizz Orch... uh, Orchid. I’ll give you a ride.”

Mizz Orchid quit swatting away the cloud of dust, got in the van and sat behind Megan. Vanessa sped off toward the manor house:

“The spaying and neutering is supposed to start in three days and everything’s behind schedule. That’s why I forgot to return to the cornfield.”

Mizz Orchid pouted. The damage was done. Now she had to salvage something out of the lost day. She moved over to the middle of the seat and found the face of the driver in the rearview mirror:

“We oughta take advantage and get Mortandela fixed, Mizz Vanessa. She’s weanin’ a litter. Goiabeira said that domestic pigs loose in the woods are real good at adaptin’ and reproducin’.”

Vanessa made fun:

“Adapt, reproduce. Fancy talk, isn’t it, Orchid? Who’s this Goiabeira character anyway?”

“The environmentalist.”

The beauty was alarmed:

“Careful with those folks. Uncle Bezerra said they’re terrorists who envy rich people and are against the progress of humanity. Where’d you meet this Goiabeira?”

Mizz Orchid hesitated.

“Nowhere. I heard’m talk on the radio.” She got nervous. Vanessa was speeding. She cut time short in the van. She was turning Mizz Orchid’s into dust. “Help me, Mizz Vanessa, get Mortandela into the castration of the dogs?”

Vanessa shook her head:

“You’re impossible, Orchid. Uncle Bezerra wants Mortandela to have babies. He always kept all the little piggies.”

“And every time they done took her youngins away, she squealed it broke your heart. Better not to have no kids!” There was a cutout of Vanessa’s stern face in the glass and metal of the rearview mirror. Mizz Orchid moaned: “It’s so mean, it takes a mother to understand.” No change in the mirrored cutout. She whimpered: “You done turn bad, Mizz Vanessa, you was such a nice young lady, a daughter to me, now you’re like a scab, God free thee.” The glass and metal of the rearview mirror began to melt. “Mortandela’s a pet, you yourself named her! You done felt so much pity when you saw her all penned up in the sty that you told us to turn her loose! You don’t remember?”

Now there was something that Vanessa would like to forget. She wouldn’t know what to say to her uncle if he found out about her crazy act. But she couldn’t give an inferior to understand that she didn’t know what she was doing. And much less that she was mean. For Bezerra Leitão’s niece was a responsible and magnanimous superior. The garden of the manor house emerged from the dry landscape. Vanessa slowed down:

“Let’s do the following. Have Zé Luiz spay Mortandela. But don’t tell anyone that I let him.”



“My son only castrates male animals. He never learned how to fix female critters.”

Vanessa began to lose her patience. Her face tried to jump over the metal fence of the rearview. The mirror hardened to contain it.

“So do it this way: have someone that I don’t know take Mortandela to the location for the spay and neuter, on the first day, at seven in the morning. Invent a different name for her and have the person say that he’s the owner. I’ll pretend I don’t know anything and I’ll have the vet do the surgery. Then the person will have to take the sow back to you. Understood?”

“Got it,” said an excited Mizz Orchid, thinking of asking German to carry out the task.

Vanessa parked in front of the manor house, waited for Megan to get out, blew her a couple of airy kisses, and took off for the peasant’s place.

“Mizz Vanessa?” Mizz Orchid called in a tiny voice. The beauty pretended not to hear. The employee increased the volume of her voice. “Mizz Vanessa, you think you and the priest could squeeze Mortandela’s eight little ones into the castration?”

Now Vanessa was worried. Mizz Orchid was losing it. She needed to see a psychiatrist for poor folk. Vanessa accelerated and changed the subject:

“The cooks made a great lunch today. I had seconds three times.”

“Too bad next week they’ll be able to cook pork again. Speakin’ of pigs, you ain’t answered if you can work Mortandela’s piglets into the castration.”

Vanessa evaded:

“Wait, let me think.”

The road finally brought her the peasant’s house, the stub of a tooth in a toothless setting. The beauty parked near Vanessa’s Garden and waited for Mizz Orchid to get out. She quickly locked all the doors, lowered her window slightly, and showed her order-giving beak:

“Have Zé Luiz hand over the eight little ones to my uncle tomorrow! If not, I won’t ask the vet to spay Mortandela! Understood?”

“Yes, understood,” a surprised Mizz Orchid replied.

“And have Zé Luiz hurry up with the starter plants in the blessed garden! Day after tomorrow, at the latest!”

“Sorry, Mizz Vanessa. But for now the garden is gonna stay a pigpen. Mortandela and her barrow pals are gonna be penned up for ten days or so.”

“What??”

“If they’re separated for too long, things get funny and they fight.”

“I’ve never heard that before. You’re making that up.”

“I know them pigs since they was born. I know plenty well what I’m doin’, unlike certain folks with air in their heads...” she needled.

“Well leave those barrows in the woods!” the beak ordered. “Did you understand what I said?”

“Yes ma’am I understood,” Mizz Orchid grumbled. Her reflection in the car window scared her: a spook with bulging eyes and flared nostrils, her face mingled with Vanessa’s fury.

The niece of the owner of the farm sped off with no goodbyes. That’s what she got for being friendly with subalterns, she concluded. They ended up forgetting their places and next thing you knew they were telling lies and telling those in charge what to do. Aunt Marcela knew what she was talking about. Servants, give them an inch and they’ll take a mile. Vanessa was being used and abused because of her innocence and good faith. She should have stopped lending an ear to Mizz Orchid a long time ago, but instead of that, she even served as her driver. The whole thing with the surgery for the sow was the last straw. Yes the little pig was a dear, for sure, and if spaying and neutering improved the quality of life for pet dogs and cats, it would improve hers too. Vanessa was a person who kept her word so she would have the vet operate on the sow. She was benevolent

and had good judgment. But her friendship with Mizz Orchid ended there.

Wearing an old bathrobe discarded by the niece of the owner of the farm, the peasant woman filled the bucket shower with water from the well. She'd no longer have time for the afternoon nap she'd hoped for, and she dreamed of relaxing as she bathed. She was sorry she hadn't managed to convince Vanessa of the need to pen up the barrows. She'd have to come up with another excuse to keep them in the pigsty before, during and a little after the direct action, without raising suspicion. She hung the bathrobe on a nail outside the cubicle door and took her shower. Then she cracked open the door and reached for the bathrobe.

"Orchid!" shouted Bezerra Leitão on horseback with Diogo.

She dropped the bathrobe, covered herself with her hands, Yes sir?, she responded through the boards, unsure she wanted to be located.

The patriarch confirmed the absence of pigs in the pigsty, which had been taken over by shelves with little plants.

"Orchid, how did the pigs end up in the woods? Zé Luiz knows that I don't want pigs running loose."

She was afraid to tell on Vanessa, that bitch might want to take revenge. She tangled her tongue in an inaudible explanation, And that's the way it was, Mr. Bezerra Leitão, sir.

He didn't understand but let it go. He avoided looking at the cubicle. He was not given to bothering ladies when they were in the bathroom.

"Have Zé Luiz put all the pigs back in that pigsty!" he shouted. "I want the job done tomorrow morning at the latest. Understood?"

"Yes sir, I understood!" a thrilled Mizz Orchid replied.

She heard them gallop into the distance. She got into the bathrobe and exited the cubicle, determined to have supper before her son because she was starving. The gallop returned with Trotamundos and Bezerra Leitão.

"Silly me... I was about to forget something," said the patriarch. "Have Zé Luiz take all eight piglets to the concrete building tomorrow morning at the latest!" He whipped Trotamundos and departed.

Mizz Orchid lost her appetite. She was saddened just to think of all the crying by Mortandela and her offspring during the separation. She tried not to think about the imprisonment of the little ones. She sought to ignore the setbacks in what she was doing. She consoled herself with her victories and even fed on them. She dripped a little oil onto an old red lipstick, put on her best dress and tied her hair in a bun with a lace ribbon. She rubbed lavender on her arms. She shined her church shoes and left them next to the bed to put them on before going out. When the lipstick had softened she applied a little on her lips and used a tad for rouge on her cheeks.

"Mother, where're you goin', painted up like that?" wondered Zé Luiz, back from work.

"To the meetin', where else?"

He left his dung-covered boots near the door and washed his hands:

"Today's meeting was canceled."

"Oh, what a pity!" said Mizz Orchid as if speaking of a party.

"At this stage of the operation, we got more to do outside the meeting room than inside. Recruit supporters for the direct action, for example. For that I'm going back out, after I take a shower."

"What time you comin' back?"

"I dunno, mother."

Mizz Orchid suspected that her son was going to see the meretricious Doralice. She remembered that she was exhausted. She put her shiny shoes away, frustrated not to be able to meet German and ask him to take Mortandela to the vet. Zé Luiz sat down before his bowl of soup. Mizz Orchid transmitted Bezerra Leitão's orders. Then she casually asked him if he couldn't ask Doralice to do a little favor.

“Lil’ favor? What lil’ favor?” he inquired, intrigued, ashamed to imagine what his mother, all painted up, could possibly want with a lady of the night.

The farm owner and his wife made fun of the hick way Megan pronounced words she had learned.

*“Mee-ah-ral!”*

*“Grau de mio!”*

They both bent over laughing.

“Every pupil has the teacher she deserves.” The fits of laughter stopped flapping their wings. Mrs. Marcela huddled like an owl: “She really could have spent the afternoon with me. I had the cooks prepare a cheese-and-guava-paste roly-poly with soy dairy and no eggs, specially for her. Even so, the little demagogue preferred to cling to that peasant woman.”

Maybe I was rude to your mother, honey, maybe I should have spent the day with her.

Maybe, but now it’s late, try to go to sleep, tomorrow and the next day you can stay around the house, out of the sun, until your nose clears up.

I feel doubly rude, Rude to your mother for having spent the day away from her, Rude to Mizz Orchid for having clung to her all day.

“At least Megan learned to say bovine feces correctly,” the farm owner conceded.

“Not bad for a grocery clerk. A mere cashier! Isn’t that what she does, cashier at one of those health-food joints?”

“But in the United States it’s normal for students to do poor people’s jobs. Megan is an intellectual, she studies literature at a college.”

“Yeah, Husband-Hunter College. She must be a good student. She’s got herself quite a catch.”

“Diogo seems to be very fond of the girl, dear.”

"I don't know what my son sees in that pasty thing, she has no present and no future," the wife grumbled, finishing a steak sandwich.

Someone knocked on the door. Bezerra Leitão got up to see who it was.

"If it's Deuzicreide with the eggnog," said Mrs. Marcela, "tell her to go back to the kitchen and make another one, thicker."

"But don't you want to try it first?"

"No need. I already know it's bad. Deuzicreide is not good at making eggnog with whisky. Even less if made with soy milk and no egg."

The husband gave the maid the message and sat back down in front of his plate of leftover steak. Mrs. Marcela griped:

"And those collars! And her sleeves!"

"What happened, dear?"

"Always stained. The collars and sleeves of Megan's clothes. We know it's because of the sunscreen. But people who don't know, what will they say?"

Not even sunscreen has a chance against that much sun, my cancer will come back sooner, Megan complained, huddled against Diogo's chest.

It won't come back at all, baby, but, if it does, it will have a helluva fight with me, I'm going to be powerful, I'm going to be a millionaire. Unreliable, that's what she is, my cousin has always been unreliable.

She really does mistreat the peasant woman with the name of a flower.

How could she forget you for so long in the sun?!

"At least her cancer is not life-threatening."

"Sooner or later she'll end up having one. That disease spares no one. Ah, Bezerra, I wish you hadn't gotten in the way of Diogo's relationship with Vanessa. I was betting on them when I saw them being boyfriend and girlfriend as kids. That could have led to marriage. All the property would have remained in the family."

“And run the risk of having disabled grandkids? In-breeding is a serious problem,” affirmed the swine and cattle breeder.

“Hogwash! We’d make a promise to Our Lady of Good Birth, we’d ask Father Cristiano to intercede with the saint on our behalf.” She started to make another sandwich. “And if the baby had a problem, so what? Are you prejudiced against the disabled?”

“No, ma’am, I am not.”

“Yes you are.”

“How could I? I myself have a disability.”

“You took the words out of my mouth. Your paralyzed leg, for example, has it interfered with your life?”

“Interfered? Not really.”

“So then. Even limping, you have four living offspring, all men.” The patriarch bowed his head, downcast, thinking of Diego. “Even limping, you’re rich, you tell people what to do in the courts and city council, you even have power in the state senate. Of course it’s better to have a normal child than a disabled one. But in-breeding is better than no breeding at all.”

The patriarch rolled a piece of steak on his tongue, unmindful of its taste. Marcela was referring to Diogo and Megan’s plans to adopt orphans instead of having their own kids. Bezerra Leitão had suffered great grief when he heard about those plans at dinner from his own heir, his mouth full of brown rice and tabouli. We don’t want to contribute to the overpopulation of the planet, father, but do want to help children in need who are already on it. For Bezerra Leitão this brought to mind true stories that proved the widely disseminated accusations of ingratitude in adopted children. He was terrified by the prospect of an empty future without veins and arteries carrying his blood across those two-hundred year old properties.

The doorbell rang.

“It must be Tiago’s sushi,” said Mrs. Marcela.

It’s the sushi bar delivery boy, scoffed Diogo, looking out the window, He’s handing over a package to Tiago.

Megan in turn, I saw your mother taking a tray to her room, It had bread and meat left over from last night's dinner, I think the vegan food the cooks are making is not going over too well.

My family is addicted to meat, honey, they can't go a day without, much less a week.

"She's a girl who's very different from us," Bezerra Leitão bemoaned. "Unfortunately she's an odd American. I usually like Americans. I like many things about their culture. Rodeo for one. Another is kids wrestling with pigs in a pen full of mud. The kid who gets a pig into a barrel the quickest is the winner. I always wanted to import that rural tradition from Wyoming to Perobinha do Campo. It's a simple game, democratic; boys and girls of all classes, religions and colors can get in on it. It encourages healthy competition. It represents the American spirit very well, in my humble opinion."

"Well if Diogo marries Megan, you can forget it. She doesn't seem to respect traditions, not even of her own country."

"That's true. She's sort of subversive. I hope she's not one of those anarchists for sexual promiscuity and the destruction of the property of right-minded people."

Mrs. Marcela knocked on wood:

"God is a good Father and doesn't abandon His children. Now that Diogo knows that he's going to run an agribusiness, he'll open his eyes and get that girl out of his life faster than you can skin a cat."

The doorbell rang again.

It's the delivery boy from the Perobão Bovino Bar-B-Q, laughed Diogo, peeping through the window, He's handing a package over to Rodrigo.

Megan pulled the sheet over herself and closed her eyes. Making fun of others is also tiresome. Good night, honey.

Diogo covered her with his body, how about a kiss.

The kiss evolved into more intimate forms of expressing love. Some cries of pleasure escaped to Diogo's parents' room. Mrs. Marcela crossed herself:



“How shameful, Bezerra. In our own home.”

Afterwards Megan told Diogo that she had to marinate the news of his inheritance in the chemicals of her brain while she slept, Maybe tomorrow I'll be able to ponder all that better, honey.

Diogo didn't let her sleep, I'm also confused, Why don't we ponder together? You're going to own the farms and post-farmgate businesses as much as me.

She turned her red nose up and projected the green of her eyes on the ceiling. She drafted a rough plan. As soon as Diogo took over his father's business, the farms would be transformed into a combination of agroforest and sanctuary. All the nonhumans would cease to be treated as property and would live free in the sanctuary, which would occupy the largest area. This area would diminish in size as its residents died of old age and the agroforest grew. As long as the individuals of the masculine sex had not undergone vasectomy as a form of birth control that did not suppress sexual pleasure, they would live separately from those of the feminine sex. After the males were sterilized, courtship and sexual relations would be allowed, since they constituted practices of the highest interest for sentient beings, at least the vast majority of them. As they were so numerous, the freed ones, even running loose, might be a little confused and stressed. Some might cause social disturbances. In this case, these individuals would have to be separated from the community, in comfortable and spacious stables or pens as long as necessary to undergo therapy for gradual resocialization. As soon as they showed themselves to be ready for social interaction, they would return, totally free, to the company of the others. In fifteen or twenty years at most, there would not be a single nonhuman domesticated or treated as a commodity on the lands of Megan and Diogo.

The agroforests would be collectivized at the outset of the new administration. All the persons who until then had been working for the patriarch would have rights to their sustainable use, equal to those of Megan and Diogo. All would be equally responsible for their preservation and improvement. All would be equally responsible for the happiness of the animals in the

sanctuaries. And all would be vegans. No harm, at first, in the agroforests being organic. That was because the compost used to fertilize them would come from the sanctuary animals, and not from subjugated animals. But, with the natural death of all the freed animals, supplementary fertilization of the agroforests would become veganic.

Very good, Mizz Megan! Diogo applauded. Now tell me: what are we going to do with the post-farmgate businesses?

The light of the green projectors went out, I don't know yet, honey, the post-farmgate businesses will marinate in my mind for a while until they can be processed.

In any event, I found your plan for the farms to be marvelous, I haven't stopped ruminating about the same utopia ever since I got the news about the inheritance.

His beloved frowned upon the word utopia, What do you mean? Utopia in the sense of describing an ideal place? Or in the sense of an unattainable goal?

Diogo responded with a question, Have you thought about the logistics of that project?

Megan was a bit irked, Utopia in the sense of an unattainable goal, that was what you meant!

That's not what I said. I asked a question.

Have I thought about the logistics? She rolled her eyes, disdainful, No, I haven't thought about the logistics, I presented a pilot plan, we can see about the logistics later.

Diogo sat on the bed, lordlike, You don't own anything, for you it's easy to leave the important things for later.

I don't own anything but I will!, said Megan, her voice louder than she would like. And she repented. Or I won't be owner of anything, maybe I in fact prefer not owning anything... I don't want to be responsible for an agribusiness built on the backs and the sacrifices of my equals. And excuse my frankness, Diogo, but I don't like one bit the idea of associating myself with those responsible for that enterprise!

Diogo panicked, he hugged her, Then I'll give it up, honey, I'll give up the inheritance, I don't want any farm and much less post-farmgate businesses.

Megan moved away, You shouldn't give up anything, You have to keep and transform what you stand to inherit. Rejecting or selling the assets would mean continuing to allow the use of the same animals we want to liberate.

I also thought of that... So no one better than the two of us to take care of these farms, honey!

The eyes of the activist resumed their pursuit of dreams on the ceiling. Just imagine!, they shimmered. Having four worlds in hand to show the rest of humanity as an example of attainable utopia! That might be more effective than all the anti-speciesist and pro-vegan information tables that I could set up on campus! Than all the boycotts of fish, dairy and eggs that I could organize encouraging the replacement of those products with vegetables! Than all the campaigns for spaying, neutering and adopting dogs and cats that I could get involved in! Than all the stands of vegan food that I could set up at fairs and festivals! And, especially, than all the theses and academic essays that I could write about the concern of poets and novelists with the disrespect toward animals! No, Diogo, forget about giving up the inheritance. No way, honey!

Diogo lay down, I know, everything you're saying has already crossed my mind too, But what money will I use to carry out the project?

Megan went to the dressing table to see if her nose was still red, the logistics would come later and the other practical details too.

Diogo got up, he insisted, So do you have any idea how strong the opposition will be from my family, Holy Hill, the executives...?

I didn't say it would be easy.

And do you have any idea how much everything will cost, severance pay for executives, investments in the agroforests, training the workers to take care of the sanctuaries?, Do you have any idea at all?, I don't, but, whether we want it or not, perhaps

I'll have to sell two of the farms to realize the project on the other two...

Megan shouted, No selling farms!

But if I could sell at least one farm to transform the other three...

No selling farms, Diogo!

"They're quarreling," whispered Bezerra Leitão. A groggy Mrs. Marcela opened her eyes. "I can't make out what they're saying, but they're having it out."

The matron sharpened her ears. It was on such occasions that understanding English would really come in handy.

Honey, get real, sometimes I think your doctrine has a problem, it lacks pragmatism.

Diogo, you often use the wrong words to talk with me, Doctrine, pragmatism, gimme a break!

So let's sell the post-farmgate businesses, they must be worth a lot where they are, where animal agribusiness prospers.

You can't be serious, Diogo! If you were a Nazi converted to Judaism, would you dare sell your post-farmgate businesses linked to a concentration camp to another Nazi?

That comparison is ridiculous and offensive!

Megan shouted, Your idea is offensive!

Diogo whispered, Honey, speak more softly or my family will think that we're quarreling.

Megan spoke softly, After all, do you want to combat or do you want to nurture our culture of domination of nonhumans? Do you want to combat or reinforce the hierarchical speciesist paradigm???

Of course I want to combat, but I think that you're not grasping the dimensions of our problem.

Our problem, and the whole world's problem, is that it's wrong to take advantage of animals, humans or otherwise, as if they were mere instruments, for whatever!

Agreed. But, madam, could you point a way out of this dilemma?

Megan thought and thought. And she said, Of course, the way out is to sell the post-farmgate businesses to a businessman who doesn't exploit animals!

A businessman who doesn't exploit animals? In the Center West? That will be difficult, Megan, very difficult. In any case, the money from those sales alone will not be enough.

It ought to be enough to support the freed animals for a while... as long as you give up on the agroforests!

Give up on the agroforests? Wouldn't even think of it! I prefer to sell one of the farms or even two.

That is out of the question!

I disagree! At least with that money we can manage to help some animals. It's better than not helping any!

But you shouldn't harm some, just because you're going to help others! For example, do you think that it would be right for researchers to use you, Diogo, against your will, as a guinea pig in a laboratory, if with that they could find the cure for a fatal disease and save a bunch of people? Huh?

Diogo was puzzled, No...it wouldn't be right... that would be an assault on my rights.

So! Now put yourself in the place of the animals you want to sell. Do you still think it's right to use the poor things in a commercial transaction for the benefit of others?

No. But I'll give up my ethical coherence in this particular case.

Over my dead body!, she bellowed.

Megan, he said in a low voice, if you want to call me a reactionary, there's nothing I can do about it. But the fact is that we'll be obliged to use part of the money earned with the exploitation of the farm animals and with the post-farmgate businesses, be it to liberate the largest possible number of those animals, or to earn more money, or to care for your health, or for us to have fun... That's what will happen, and even then we'll be able to help so many individuals, more than you could possibly help, Now, enough arguing, let's go to sleep.

"I can't hear anything else, Bezerra."

“I think they stopped quarreling.”

“I don’t have to be a polyglot to understand the obvious. The days of this relationship are numbered. Come here, pumpkin, give a little kiss to your kitten.”

The patriarch did what his wife requested. The couple’s kiss evolved into other forms of expressing love — slow and excruciating forms.

Honey, whispered Diogo, can you hear a bed creaking?

Yes I can, she said, annoyed, I think your parents are doing it.

Hee hee hee, they laughed quietly.

Diogo hugged her, It’s not worth it to get all riled up over the inheritance, honey, we have plenty of time to study the issue, consult abolitionists, research similar situations, to figure out the logistics thing carefully, everything. Love you.

Good night, Sleep tight, said Megan, automatically.

She kept watch on the room with her eyes lit up. She picked up ideas from the night and organized them in logical order. With no air to breathe but that of a civilization built above all on abuse, she was used to being torn because of ethical conflicts. But all animals have their limits for overcoming or managing conflicts, and she had just met hers. Just as elephants wither in zoos, she would wilt in Diogo’s element. The promised inheritance, overwhelming and sinister, and the willingness of the heir to use a certain number of animals as if they were merchandise, were falling onto her life like a tragedy. Megan felt herself being poisoned by the same love that had nourished her. The boyfriend whom she had helped to get out of the mire to tread her path was dragging her back to the mud. The hard stonewall that was her support also oppressed her. The shade that protected her also blinded her. Where relationships were exchange, she ended up losing; where they were learning, she regressed. She felt a broad, deep and agonizing longing for some undefined thing. She tried evoking the image of Sybil. The woman who showed up to fill the void was the broken and opaque former heroine, defeated by the culinary sabotage of a husband. Megan tried evoking River. The man who presented

himself was the translucent revolutionary companion, radiant with uplifting energy, the new, agile and impeccable one moving forward along the same path as her. Megan felt an intense need to walk at his side. It was not her vocation to struggle in the midst of Mafia types, in a desert territory smelling of carnage. Her talent would flourish more in less dire and less unjust surroundings. River belonged to a progressive family. His mother was a lawyer for Amnesty International. His father was a lobbyist for an environmentalist organization. His grandmother, an editor at the leftist magazine *The Nation*, was married to a professor of ecology. An adopted brother of his, an Asian-African-American transsexual, had left his business partner — an elderly woman, a paraplegic Muslim little person — in charge of his clinic in San Francisco to go work as a volunteer for Doctors Without Borders in the Congo. Megan didn't know if the progressive tradition of River's family was two hundred years old. But she liked to believe that, if any innocent blood stained the curriculum vitae of his more remote ancestors, his recent genealogy was immaculate enough to neutralize it.

River, the Perfect Guy. That's how Diogo used to make fun, out of pure envy, Megan recalled. And she took delight in thinking that whatever epithet might be attributed to her ex-boyfriend, the last three years had bestowed qualities upon him that were no less than great. His appearance was more sexy, his conversation more mature, and his flirting more elegant. The show-off rascal, inflamed by testosterone and fascinated with Sybil, seemed to have evolved into a sensible and insightful adult. Megan had also matured. She had traded her blind and naïve devotion for a more realistic view of her mother. Now she had the responsibility to transmit her discoveries to River, if not to help him grow, then to bring him up to date about her emotional progress. And if, besides informing him about the hypocrisy and levity that Sybil had shown herself to be capable of by submitting herself to the patriarchal yoke of an animal predator, Megan were to tell him that, in her opinion, her mother would rather date women than men, she would be doing him the double favor of making his perception even more precise and of eliminating an old and useless fascination of his — if in fact said fascination still existed.

In the dark Megan saw two chlorophyll dreams, River and her in love again, on the same path, without the obstacle of Sybil. For River was now able to see the other side of that extraordinary woman: a fallible human animal of fragile character, a negligent mother, a woman whose age was beginning to confiscate her physical beauty, a lesbian indifferent even to the most indisputable masculine charms.

Wonderful, Megan.

She got up from the bed quietly. She turned on the lamp and began to take her clothes out of the closet.

Diogo woke up, whispered, Honey, what are you doing?

The suitcase. Megan had to go away.

Away? What do you mean away? You want to go away from the farm?

Yes.

He got up slowly, dazed, he saw her folding clothes with trembling hands, Well, Megan, I know it must be a real bummer for you to stay here, but let's at least wait until dawn! We'll get up, have breakfast, and go to a hotel in town.

Megan had to go away. Away away. Away to Florida.

To Florida? And why are you in such a hurry?

She exhaled nervously, stomped one foot, she had to go, that was it, end of discussion.

He got apprehensive, he got a suitcase out from under the bed, If you insist on going, let's go, honey, I can make up a story about some emergency, but at least tell me why...

By herself. Megan had to go away by herself.

What??

Diogo must forgive her, he was one of the coolest humans in the world, in so many ways... but she had realized that she had no business marrying him, becoming the wife of the owner of sentient beings.

Diogo's hands froze, You realized? When?

She didn't know, she had the impression that it had been that very night, but the whole thing must have been growing for a



while inside of her. Marrying a man who depended on exploiting slaves even to abolish slavery did not fit her moral principles.

Diogo teetered, legs weak, Uhh, Megan, then we don't have to get married, we'll just be together, that's simple.

Megan began to cry.

He hugged her, Come back to bed, we'll discuss all this in the morning.

She stepped back, Diogo didn't understand! She didn't want to invest her very life, which might not last long, in managing unnecessary conflicts! She knew a way to have a better life, in accordance with the things she believed! Why look for trouble? Why rot in a relationship with a peddler of sentient beings, if she could flourish in another one without usurping anything? Why make a pact with a system of oppression if she could cooperate with another one of liberty? At Diogo's side, Megan would end up contaminated.

Diogo was listening totally perplexed, Megan, I'm shocked by what you're telling. I had no idea you could see our relationship in such a negative way.

Me neither... and please forgive me for being so rude to you... I myself hadn't perceived all the implications of our relationship. I had to see my mother degrade herself at Bob's side to end up realizing the risk of degrading myself with you. I had to see your inheritance fall on us to discover that I need to get out of this trap while there's still time! I have a choice! Sorry, Diogo... but if I don't say these things, you won't understand! It's so easy for us to be corrupted living with corrupt people. Today, for example, you, who believe that animals should not be used, spent hours riding around the farm with your father, using a horse as a mount!

Megan, it was a special situation!

All the situations we'd be in as a couple, from now on, would be special, you understand, Diogo?

Not exactly. During the transition period on the farm, and at the other businesses, I'd spare you. And I'd do my absolute best to be as consistent as possible with abolitionism.

But your absolute best, Diogo, would still be too little. Your best effort is my minimum effort. As I said, even to free captives you want to sacrifice others. It's the height of contradiction! Maybe people more in tune with using animals can accept a situation like that. I can't. I prefer to strengthen another more just situation. I have a way out.

Diogo folded his arms, Megan, you don't know what you're saying. You must be having a passing crisis caused by cultural conflict. It's very common to have culture shock in a foreign country. Try to see things with more maturity...

You too Diogo, try to be more mature. The animals shouldn't have to pay for our frailties and our relationship issues. To help the animals on your farms, you don't need to cling to me!

Cling? You mean our love, transformative cooperation, all that shit, turned into nothing more than clinging in your eyes?

What I mean is that I can collaborate with your project, looking for people in the United States who could provide you with orientation so that no animal would be harmed. That's what I would do, from my own country...

So you'd have the courage to abandon these animals here? At the eleventh hour, time to get your hands dirty?

Megan exploded, Don't be unfair to me, Mr. Diogo Luís Bezerra Leitão! You're trying to make me feel guilty for the suffering of these animals! But the guilty parties in this situation are the people who consume animal products, not me! Those who make their livings in the animal business are also guilty, but if it weren't for the consumers the animal farms wouldn't exist and the two of us wouldn't be having this terrible argument now: we wouldn't be trying to resolve dilemmas that shouldn't even have been created in the first place! I've always been vegan, since I was a baby. I've been involved in educating people to be vegans too and I'll keep at it... But I'm going to do all that in an environment that's me! And together with people like me! With River, for example.

Diogo's throat locked up. He managed to gasp *River!*... So now we get to the real reason. You want to go after the Perfect Guy!

Don't be so simplistic, please. And it's not like, "going after" River. But I do like him, it's true. I think I never stopped liking him.

Diogo took a deep breath, pride wounded, anger. He went to the door.

You know what you're doing, Megan. You want to go, go. Stuck on me you're not.

He left her alone and locked himself in the bathroom. He sat on the toilet seat and began to cry.

### Bass Clef

When he saw the aircraft touch down, River felt the old fascination rise from its pillowed berth and grow. He hid the evidence of his feeling behind a bouquet of wildflowers, which he was clutching in the palm of his hand to welcome the visitor, and further sweetened his algae-candy eyes.

Sybil had little luggage and seemed apprehensive. She greeted him, got into the hybrid car, and discreetly eyed him take a small box of vegan bonbons from the glove compartment. She accepted the offer from the spider-like hands.

“Welcome to your new city,” he said through a slippery smile.

Sybil thanked him quietly and relished the bonbons. She was hungry. She was anxious to try the raw lunch that he had promised to prepare. On a full stomach she would be more able to evaluate homes for sale and to deal with real estate agents.

On the way to River’s apartment, she mentioned that she had been lucky to get a last-minute ticket to Florida during the height of spring break.

“Women like you don’t have *luck*,” he corrected. “Women like you *deserve* things like that.”

She complained about the agony of waiting for some passenger not to show, about the extortionary price of the ticket, about the not-so-happy surprises of the trip with its convoluted itinerary riddled with connections.

“OK, I take back what I said,” the young man rectified. “You deserve much better.”

Between bites of pistachio crepe with alfalfa sprouts in tangerine sauce and sips of pomegranate juice with sweet basil (the herb coming from the veganic garden that he kept in his own yard), Sybil told River the reasons for her move to Weekeewawkeeville. He listened to her with the patience of a confessional and the curiosity of a cat.

She regretted having been a negligent mother. He corrected her, Negligent? Quite the contrary, Sybil was an exemplary mother! What other adjective to attribute to a woman determined to trade a progressive environment in the north for an adventure in the unknown in the south just to reverse the hypothetical harm of a supposed laxity in raising her daughter?

She felt guilty for having been a frivolous and hypocritical activist when she had surrendered to the patriarchal domination of her husband, the consumer of animals Bob Beefeater. Hypocritical?, the host was surprised, Frivolous? Sybil was not talking about the same person as he was! The woman he was referring to was the responsible activist who had known enough to break off, in dignified and resolute fashion, a union based on her merciful tolerance of a companion not apt to assimilate the value of veganism.

She confessed that she was ashamed of being a fallible human animal of fragile character. He corrected her, Ashamed?? How absurd. She should be proud, yes proud, of being an animal who, though condemned to the vileness of the human condition, struggled bravely to live according to her most just ethical ideals!

River heard himself strident. He viewed himself ardent, shining. He had lost his appetite. He wasn't sleeping a lot. All he could think of was Sybil. He was frightened by his own obsession. Where could his fascination for a woman old enough to be his mother have come from? He didn't have all the explanations. But he supposed that some of them were within his reach, in her body, waving at him with the silvery flash of a streak of hair, peering at him from within a wrinkle. That nearly semi-centennial feminine universe hid a secret he wanted to penetrate. He was strongly impelled to peregrinate down the road of that already somewhat languid flesh that at the table of his modest kitchen was feeding voluptuously on the creations that he offered in the form of live seeds, garden greens, and fruits.

Busy days. Short days. He lived nervously in a coming and going of paradoxes. When Sybil was near, he sensed her escaping. When she would draw away, he sensed her closer. Though she hadn't asked him to, he followed her to visit homes for sale and on get-acquainted tours around town. Though she

didn't need it, he advised her on contacts with agents and on signing a bid on a home. While she didn't heap praise on him for being helpful, she didn't accuse him of being meddlesome either. In that he saw a green light. He planned a farewell dinner with lots of flowers in the kitchen, followed by an intertwining of bodies in his room, amidst aromatic candles.

The closest he had managed to get to Sybil's secret was Megan. She looked so much like Sybil, that girl! Or at least that's how River saw her. The daughter, a fresh version of the mother. The fetish in duplicate. Double the turn-on. Might Megan one fine day, like her mother, also discover she was gay? He was delighted. Lesbians, the supreme fantasy of the contemporary American heterosexual human male! Sybil and Megan lesbians... and incestuous! River fueled the fire of his dreams, he masturbated. Then he would relax, happy. He would muse. Solitary and secret self-stimulation is the safest form of human recreation, free and unpunished, with the taboo of one's choice (as inviolable as it might be) without infringing upon anyone's rights. And not believing in a Creator to thank for the cathartic and liberating gift of onanism, he was content to recognize a successful development in life. Long live life!, he celebrated with his buttons of recycled material, Long live life, which made it possible for him to have inoffensive orgasms with any and all make-believe stories, both the transformative and the conservative, the correct and the incorrect, the superfluous and the essential, the obvious and the mysterious, the sordid and the sublime, lesbian and incestuous Sybil-mothers and Megan-daughters in an orgy, during a raw vegan regaling, in a world free of exploiters of sentient beings.

Sybil was too busy with her own affairs to process all the energy the young man surrounded her with. It was true that she'd been lured by his adulation and culinary excellence. But she was also taken aback by the eagerness with which he forgave her mistakes, did favors for her, followed her around and served her food. At the end of day two, she regretted having accepted his invitation to stay at his apartment. She thought that she still had time to avoid a potential disaster by spending the rest of her stay at another address. She grabbed her limited baggage, announced

that she was indebted to the kind host, and asked for the key to Megan's house.

"The least I can do for you is take care of my daughter's cats and dogs," she argued.

"I'll come along," he said, reaching for the key.

Sybil snatched the key out of his hand:

"No way. You've already helped me so much. I don't want to be any further trouble. I'll stay at Megan's place till tomorrow."

River turned his face of snuffed-out candles and wilted flowers toward her:

"Then at least allow me to take you there."

"If it's no bother..."

He filled a bag with fruit, nuts and dinner leftovers:

"For your breakfast."

She felt an unbearable tenderness for the lad. She hid it beneath the protocol of a thank-you.

Alone in Megan and Diogo's bed, she fell asleep feeling ecstatic to be the only human in the house. In the middle of the night, she got up to pee. The light was on in the room. To her right, a mixed poodle with the name Marguerite Yourcenar on her collar was snoring. To her left, the cats Mary Shelley and Charlotte Brontë gazed at her in yellow. At five thirty A.M., curled up between the labrador Mahatma Gandhi, the beagle Bernard Shaw and the Siamese mix Alice Walker, she was awakened by the ringing of the telephone.

"Good morning, Sybil. I'll be there in five minutes," said River.

She jumped up, put on her jeans and a short-sleeve T-shirt hurriedly selected from her daughter's wardrobe. She had planned visits with her guide to the animal sanctuaries in the area. He had told her that every month he donated a few hours of work to the local abolitionist sanctuaries and on that occasion, with her help, he would be more motivated than ever to do the job.

She welcomed him with her mouth full of toothpaste. Much to her embarrassment, he took care of the cats and dogs and, setting the table for breakfast, of her as well.

Sybil had her reservations about sanctuaries that expose refugees to the public. Many of those shelters seemed to her to be zoos with a façade of charity, indifferent to the desire of the animals for privacy. But River assured her that he only worked for those sanctuaries where the activists explained to visitors, crossing all the Ts and dotting all the Is, why the existence of sanctuaries should not even be necessary in the first place. At the one for primates rescued from laboratories, monkey-grinders, circuses, and homes, he asked for the help of his beloved to saw branches that had fallen during a hurricane the year before and to stack the pieces of wood in the back of a pickup truck. At the pig sanctuary, he called upon her to cut up two dozen pumpkins for the residents' lunch and to adopt symbolically Constantine, a young Hampshire recently freed from a man who tyrannized pit bulls and intended to use the pig as bait in dogfight training. At the horse sanctuary, he helped her brush Little Wing, a former New Orleans carriage horse who was injured and traumatized by Hurricane Katrina, and to bathe Blanca, a blind Appaloosa rescued from the Everglades, where she had been abandoned to the alligators by her enslaver. Finally, at the sanctuary for big cats, the pair affixed signs with the biographies of some newcomers and met the male cougar Wanderlust.

Wanderlust was in puberty when he was squeezed into a large dog carrier and pushed out of the back of a pickup truck next to the main gate of the sanctuary, without the vehicle even stopping. In the opinion of the activists, Wanderlust was likely raised as a domestic cat until he began to exhibit, to the displeasure of the person raising him, an essential characteristic of wild felines: the instinct of marking almost everything around him with copious quantities of urine with a stunning odor. As if life as a pet weren't perverse enough for a jungle predator, Wanderlust had to endure further debasement. He was anemic, atrophied, toothless, and his claws had been mutilated along with the tips of all his digits. Just as forests are increasingly inadequate for animal life, he was not fit for life in the forest, and he was settled on a plot of land the size of a soccer field with various



bushes, an oak in the middle, an underground concrete cave, a hurricane shelter, and a small artificial lake. The management decided that Wanderlust, once there were available time and personnel, would be sterilized to avoid him generating new captives, and that afterwards he would be tested for social life among others of his or of different species. If he passed the test, he would have to live with one or more colleagues — even though in nature cougars were solitary beings — and he would leave the area that he previously occupied for a new refugee.

A fifteen-feet high metal fence that bent in to form a roof, which closed around the oak, isolated Wanderlust's space. His mini-biography, printed on one of the signs being installed by Sybil and River, indicated that in nature cougars can zigzag up to twenty miles a night. But, on the soccer field at his disposition, Wanderlust didn't have much to do in the dark. He would go from here to there, pee, from there to here, pee, climb on a branch, pee, climb down. He'd lap a little water from the lake. He'd listen to and smell the air. He would pee. He would whittle the day away in the cave, with his eyes closed but restless, chasing dreams through an area of twenty miles to be marked with his urine to avoid fights and to attract girlfriends. On afternoons that left him sleepless or bored with the same dreams, he would come out of his den to observe the comings and goings of the humans and to wait for feeding time. The wait was long and impotent. Wanderlust got around the tedium soaking bushes, rocks, and the oak with the exciting appeal of his urine.

Even before seeing Sybil and River coming his way, he was able to hear them and smell them. He hid in a bush near the fence and waited for them to come by. From a distance he perceived that they had something in their hands. It was not anything to sate hunger or quench thirst, he soon discovered; maybe it was something to harm and humiliate. The two strangers came to a halt within reach of a leap-by-Wanderlust-without-impediment-of-fence. Like so many humans he'd seen before, they started to mess with the things they brought to make new things appear.

"Wanderlust. Florida Panther or Florida Cougar," said Sybil, reading one of the plaques in her hands. She confirmed the

number of the post where she was supposed to affix it. "It's here."

The two worked with the pliers and the hammer. Wanderlust was confused. Perhaps it was better to run away, he figured. Maybe he should go back to the cave. If it weren't for the impediment of the fence, he would run far away. It would be much easier and safer than trying to defend himself from the things in the humans' hands, if they were to harm and humiliate.

The couple completed their task and sat down on the grass to rest. They left the last sign to be posted and the tools on the ground. Unarmed and shrunken, they seemed harmless. Wanderlust had the courage to come out from the bush. Little by little he carefully exposed all his magnificence. Sybil and River gazed in admiration.

"How gorgeous!" the feminist murmured.

"Even skinny and toothless, he's one of the most majestic guys I've ever seen," whispered the activist.

"Wonderful, Wanderlust..."

The cougar investigated the breeze that had passed over the two strangers and was crossing through the fence to his nose. Run away or attack? Wait or desist? He growled weakly. River roared:

"Sick, Sybil! The pleasure that certain humans get from subjugating magnificent creatures like this, from reducing them to miserable versions of what they evolved to be, all that makes me sick, sick, sick!"

"Sshhh... speak more softly or you'll disturb him," she whispered. "It also makes me sick. It's revolting."

They continued conversing under their breaths:

"The least we can do for Wanderlust is to respect his privacy and pretend that we don't notice he's there."

"Right. Let's turn our backs and make believe that he doesn't even exist."

They delicately turned their backs to the innocent one condemned to life imprisonment. Sybil picked up the biography

that she was going to post on a cage farther on and read it to River:

“Ivan. Liger. Born of the crossing in captivity of a lioness and a tiger, Ivan, like all ligers, is doomed to a short and sickly life due to genetic problems.”

She felt a light something on her head. A beetle, she supposed. She continued her reading:

“He was confiscated from a roadside zoo, in an inane state.”

She controlled the urge to scratch. The beetle must be running down her hair, neck and back. Better to put up with the bug a bit longer, she thought, in a second it would find its way on the ground or in the air. She finished her reading:

“The existence of the liger, which does not occur in nature, is one more unfortunate result of the manipulation of animals as objects with no value other than the gain of profiteers and the entertainment of an uninformed public.”

A strong blow struck her nose: a sudden emphasis on feline odor. River leaped up, Watch out!, he dodged, Get outta there, Sybil!, but it was too late. Wanderlust had hit the couples' heads, backs, and elbows with his lascivious and sticky urine.

The couple took off running. They threw their work material in the booth, jumped in the car and sped off in the direction of Megan's house. Their bodies, converted into a mobile extension of the cougar's territory, were now the vehicle of a powerful official communiqué: the message of self-affirmation and eroticism that Wanderlust had composed in his kidneys and transmitted through the urethra to the bladder, and was finally exporting from his asylum.

Sybil and River rushed inside, leaving the windows of the car open to try to relieve the upholstery from the dense musk. Suspicious of the vapors emanating from them, the dogs and cats thought better of greeting them.

The two quickly removed their clothing, except their unders, and tossed them on top of the washing machine. They ran up against a second of indecision as to who would bathe first. They could do so at the same time, Sybil determined, as long as

River kept his briefs on in the shower and she kept her panties and bra on in the bathtub. And, with a serious face and finger in the air, she warned, No funny ideas should get into his head!

River felt disappointed by the warning. It was awkward to be treated like a naughty brat by his goddess. But he thought it was too early to be discouraged. After all, whether Sybil wanted to or not, she had just referred to the possibility of a relationship between them — a possibility she had refuted, just to be clear, but at least an acknowledged one. It was a start.

They washed several times the almost indelible marks left by the big cat.

“Why do you suppose Wanderlust urinated on us?” Sybil asked, wrapping her body in a towel.

“I think he didn’t urinate on us but on the fence,” said River, under the stream of water. “He must have hit us by accident.”

Sybil took off her bra under the towel and went to the door. She laughed:

“With all due respect to cougars, this was the first time in my life that I felt an urgent need to get rid of the perfume of sexual fluids!”

In the living room, back from Brazil, Megan had just been received by three prudent dogs and four leery cats. The first thing she noticed was the strong odor of feline piss. The second was human voices in the bathroom, of a man and a woman, covered up by the hissing of the shower. River mixed up with women, thought Megan in distress, River showering with some little hussy, instead of cleaning the animals’ piss. For a second she regretted having returned from the farm before the scheduled day. She tried to gulp down a knot in her throat. She didn’t manage. She looked around. On the couch, a purse made of hemp attracted her attention. She opened it quickly and searched for an ID. The driver’s license belonged to Sybil and her photo began shaking in laughter in the hand of the betrayed daughter.

Megan fought back tears and put the ID back in the purse. Sybil’s voice came into closer range, ...rid of the perfume of sexual fluids! She came into the living room, wrapped in a towel.

“Megan!” she exclaimed festively, addressing her daughter in a hug-ready pose. “What are you doing here?”

Megan avoided her:

“What are *you* doing here? This is *my* house!”

Sybil shrank. In her daughter’s small face, red eyes were dismayed, pressed lips slumped. In the bathroom, River was singing. Sybil tightened the towel around her body.

“Megan, I know what you’re thinking,” she said with care. “But it’s no such thing, OK? I just came to buy a house. River found it for me. He’s been a saint the whole time.”

“I can imagine...” Megan snarled.

Sybil tried once again to draw close to her daughter:

“Was there a problem in Brazil? Did Diogo come back with you?”

Megan felt she was losing control of her crying. She turned her back to Sybil and hardened her voice:

“Go get dressed, mom. We’ll talk later.”

“Would you like to go with me to the airport? We could talk until I board.”

“That won’t work. I have a commitment...” she hesitated, “an activist commitment.”

Her mother capitulated, conscientiously:

“Ah I see, then go ahead, dear. Those things can’t wait. But come to the bedroom in a couple of minutes for us to talk quickly.”

She grabbed her hemp purse and left the living room, watched reservedly by the cats Kafka, Plato and V. S. Naipaul.

Megan went to the kitchen to have a drink of water to try to free her throat of the large and tough lemon of disillusionment. River appeared soon after, with wet hair and a towel around his waist.

“Megan! What a nice surprise! You came back early from Brazil?”

“What do you think?” she said gruffly.

“Well, welcome! Did you talk to your mother?”

“Yes I did.”

“Then you must know about everything.”

“Of course I know about everything!” she growled. “It’s so clear! I can feel it in the air!”

“It’s because I haven’t washed our clothes yet,” he said, turning on the washer and pouring in a measure of biodegradable soap. “Mine were sopping! The sticky stuff came out in vigorous spurts, like only youthful big cats can produce.”

Megan was nauseated. What a stuck up little macho! Diogo had every reason to make fun of that little shit.

“I tried to avoid it,” River continued. “But by the time I realized it was too late. It was the work of that naughty cougar!”

Megan saw him push the dirty clothes into the washer. She remembered that he used to call her “kitten” when they were dating. Sybil, on the other hand, he had just called a cougar. It was clear which was the stronger side in that competition, in his mind. River grabbed one of Diogo’s briefs from the dryer and went to the bathroom to put it on.

“Your mother was totally wet,” he said, closing the door. “I’ve never seen anyone in such a hurry to take her clothes off.”

Megan’s nerves were bursting. Her knees, knocking. She hadn’t had any shut-eye for at least forty-eight hours. She had put up with three days in a South American inferno, broken it off with a future millionaire from Brazil, and rushed back to Weekeewawkeeville to try to rekindle an idealized relationship, only to discover that her chosen one... only to discover that he and her mother... A tear crawled down her cheek. She dried it with a trembling and merciful finger. She needed to find a way to relax... But how? She didn’t know how to meditate, she didn’t believe in prayer, and she hated medicines. She remembered an exercise taught in a book by the ecofeminist Carol J. Adams, to calm vegetarians obliged to sit at the table with meat-eaters. Maybe she could create a similar exercise to calm jealous girls and to cure broken hearts. She consulted the book on the shelf in the living room. The exercise combined breathing, posture and a kind of mantra. I thank my vegetarianism, she should say, before

breathing in. My vegetarianism guides me, she should say, before breathing out. Before breathing in again, she would say I'm at peace. Then she would say, I transmit my peace to all, and breath out.

In the kitchen, River was on the phone arranging for a taxi to take two passengers named Sybil and River to the airport. Megan lit a stick of jasmine incense. She sat down on the couch keeping her back straight, and the thumb and index finger of each hand together forming a circle. She inhaled deeply and slowly. She exhaled quietly. She repeated the rhythmic respiration with her parody of the vegetarian mantra spoken in a subdued voice:

"I thank my feminine autonomy. My feminine autonomy guides me. I'm at peace. I transmit my peace to all."

She got irritated with the tak-tak-tak of the knife on the cutting board River was using to prepare vegetables for Sybil's airplane meal. She made an effort to concentrate on her exercise, which she kept up for a few more minutes. The result was so good that she decided to go further. She tried to visualize a color. Green. But the darkness beneath her eyelids expelled weaker tints. She persisted. A reluctant specter, between light green and turquoise, filtered through the black, and bit by bit suppressed it. Megan felt she was ready. She went to the bedroom to encounter her oracle of oppressive superiority between two intimidating mountains: the mother.

She would be brief. She had better things to do than to play the role of the pathetic and helpless one. She wouldn't even bring up the issue of River. She would tell her the news of her breakup with Diogo without whimpering. Water and oil, she'd say, Diogo and I are now water and oil, it would be impossible for us to stay together, we'd live like you and Bob, in between declared war and a pact of hypocrisy. She would take a good-humored tone in a secondary narrative about her brief saga in the southern hemisphere, she'd laugh, Mrs. Marcela, mom, I'll show you the photos of that fatso later, she never took to me nor I to her, that monster's body is a veritable laboratory for type-two diabetes. Daughter dear, Sybil would censure, be respectful when you refer to others' problems, and Megan would change her tone, poor Mrs. Marcela, mom, that woman needs to learn, to educate

herself about nutrition, but as I was saying, as soon as Diogo, in the middle of the night, told Mrs. Marcela that we had broken up and that I was ready to return to Florida, she raced to the telephone, moved up my trip, insisted on paying the rebooking fine to the airline and even had her son Rodrigo, a frustrated filmmaker, take me to the airport. Then Megan would change the subject. She would mention the two things that really mattered to her (animal rights and her career) and she would say goodbye, Bon voyage, mom, I can't wait for you to move, now I have to go, I have to see what happened to a threatened crow and then I want to get back to my thesis.

She knocked lightly on the door. I thank my feminine autonomy, she inhaled. Not a word about River, she exhaled. I transmit my peace to all.

Sybil opened the door. A lackluster Megan smiled:

"Congratulations, mom. River is a wonderful guy. You two be happy together."

And she armed herself for an embrace.

In Cambridge, night was beginning to impose itself in the surroundings of the shingle-style Victorian house, sparing a protest of street lamps in a few pockets of resistance to the dark. Inside the house, night opposed clarity on six fronts, each one beneath an illuminated lampshade on a little cushion. Bob tapped on the living-room window and woke up one of the black cats. He saw her crack open her mouth and shake her whiskers. It was Bass Clef. She always made that gesture when she mewed a surprised comment. Bob rang the doorbell.

He didn't usually drop by other people's houses without calling ahead. He thought it was better to avoid unanticipated unpleasanties for host and visitor alike. But in this case there was no alternative, he justified to himself, he had left several messages on Sybil's answering machine and had sent who-knows-how-many e-mails. If she didn't want to respond, she'd have to deal with the consequences. Bob rang the doorbell again. And again.



He wanted to visit the cats. He also wanted to show Sybil the letter from the competition of the Dutch company that had invited him to participate in the lab meat project. The competitor's letter offered him, Chef Bob Beefeater, twice the honorarium promised by the Dutch firm in exchange for exclusive collaboration on the launch of a line of truly innovative and auspicious food products compared to which lab meat was nothing more than a troglodyte chimera. Sybil would love to get to know the new project. More than that, she'd approve of it. She'd be proud of Bob, knowing that he not only had accepted to participate in the venture but had also torn up his contract with the Dutch company, and had been testing new recipes to present to the executives of the other company. Bob was even willing to adapt the entire menu of his restaurant to the infinite possibilities of the new products. Sybil would listen to him, she'd recognize his dedication to doing things more her way. She'd trust in his promise never again to mix improper products in the food. Surely she'd remember the good moments of her life with a person of the opposite sex and would consider the idea of reuniting with him. One more chance, Bob only wanted one more chance to try to remake life for the two of them — for the fourteen of them he corrected himself, nostalgic for the nights when he and Sybil took delight in twelve pairs of sparks floating in the air and hunting for treats scattered on purpose throughout the dark room.

“Good evening. The lady of the house is not in at the moment. Can I help you?”

Bob turned to see who had just spoken. A young woman had pulled up on her bicycle and was walking to the door, key in hand.

“Yes you can,” the chef replied. “Please, tell me when Sybil will be back.”

“Tomorrow. Today is my last day cat sitting.”

Bob wilted. Sybil avoided him so much that she would rather hire a cat sitter than ask him to take care of the cats in her absence, something he would do for free and with pleasure. The girl went in the house.

"I'd like to see the kitties," he requested as the door was closing. The crack in the door examined him with a wary eye. "I miss them a lot. They have six adoptive siblings who went with me when Sybil and I separated."

"Ah, so you must be the chef Bob Beefeater," said the crack in the door, joylessly. "Sybil told me about you."

Bob opened his widest and nicest smile:

"Yes that's me."

The door locked. Through its little window the face of the ill-at-ease cat sitter appeared.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Beefeater. I'm not authorized to have visitors while the lady of the house is away." Safely within the Victorian fortress, the cat sitter switched from uneasiness to an attempt to be courteous: "But you'll be able to contact her soon enough. I suggest you call her tomorrow. Or send her an e-mail now. She just bought a house in Florida. She's coming back to Cambridge to close the sale of this house and arrange everything so she can move in two months, more or less."

All the remnants of Bob's good mood collapsed down his face.

"Oh... thanks," he lamented.

He took a few indecisive steps, maybe toward the street, or his car, if he could remember at all where he'd left it.

"Mr. Beefeater!" the sitter called.

Bob looked back. At the little window of the door, and in the girl's hands, was Bass Clef. The cat shook her whiskers and meowed. Bob went to her and puckered his lips up to her nose. Bass Clef purred loudly. Bob said goodbye.

Hee hee hee hee hee hee. Ha ha ha ha ha ha. Megan got off the road at the phosphorescent sign that read Alligator Plantation and entered the semi-wild yard of Dr. Stanley's clinic. She was overcome with fits of laughter every time she recalled the quid pro quo involving Sybil, River, the cougar Wanderlust and herself in the role of tragicomic victim of unfounded jealousy. Sybil had also cracked up with the mix-up, What an

imagination you have, sweetie, River and I together?, not even with the aphrodisiacs of the cougar!, You should write sitcoms and ha ha ha ha ha. Megan was terribly embarrassed to have been so stupid and nevertheless she couldn't manage to stay serious. She'd been a clown ha ha ha ha ha.

She dried the drops that rolled in laughter down her face. She continued slowly down the paved driveway not to run over any turkey or crane that might make a frightened dash from the bushes. She looked around to see if the crow was there. She detected no black bird in the crowns of the trees or against the pink and orange clouds. Nor did she see any aviary. The boat Leah was out to pasture. A street lamp was on and was watching the end of the day. Hee hee hee ha ha ha, it was as if Megan had smoked marijuana.

She parked next to the only car at the location and entered the waiting room. Alone and on the phone, the receptionist recognized the young patient with the basal cell on her eyelid.

"I'm so sorry, Megan," she said, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand. "The doctor has already left for the day and I'm on my way out. Is it an emergency?"

"No, luckily. Sorry to come so late in the day. I'd just like to know what happened to that crow that was following Dr. Stanley on his walks."

The receptionist was silent for a second then raised a solemn chin, Ah, yes, one moment please, and she went back to her phone call.

Megan sat down as far as possible from the corpses of hunted individuals that decorated the room and waited. She laughed hee hee hee hee and tried to hide her face. She needed to do something to stay serious, or the receptionist would think she was loopy. She made a mental list of the things she'd have to do to move before Diogo got back from Brazil. At River's invitation, she would stay at his apartment and, as soon as Sybil's new house was available, she'd move there. She felt like laughing again. She decided to pay attention to the receptionist's words. Maybe she was consoling some incurable patient and would make Megan sad.

“That’s May twenty-fifth, ten A.M.,” the woman said. “It’s a Sunday. Every three months, always on Sunday, The Hunting Club of Weekeewawkeeville meets for a brunch where they serve game brought back by one of the participants.”

The fits of laughter burned out. Megan recorded the date, May twenty-fifth at ten.

“All members have RSVPed,” the receptionist continued. “Yes, the governor is coming. He said that if anything comes up he will send his wife or some other representative. But he’ll come, I assure you, because he loves the club, he always finds a way to show up at the brunches and no one eats more than him. Yes indeed, Miss. Look, I should say that Dr. Stanley has tried to invite the senator many times, but no one ever gets back to him, so he asked me to talk to you, Miss. Please, see to it that your boss consider the invitation with an open heart, if you know what I mean. Of course! Of course the invitation includes you too, Miss, the club has no biases, even me, a mere receptionist, I’m part of it, imagine you, an eminent intern. I’ll send you the list of members by e-mail first thing tomorrow, and please send it on to the senator. The club has exceptional people, you know, distinguished citizens, lawyers, doctors, conservationists, owners of real estate companies and agricultural businesses, politicians, dealers of arms and recreational pharmaceuticals, rap artists. You’ll get along well with the group, I’m certain. Our only requirement to join, besides the recommendation of a member, is a love of hunting. Since you’re a good friend of a Florida state senator, Miss, you have more than a recommendation... What did I say? Good friend? Sorry, I meant intern, Since you’re an intern of a Florida state senator you have a strong recommendation. As for loving hunting, it’s like this, just by the sound of your voice I can tell that you like to hunt. You don’t? But why aren’t you a fan of the sport, if you don’t mind saying? Ah, guns upset you... No mind, Dr. Stanley’s clinic will be happy to compensate you for the bother with a year-long toner and beauty treatment for your skin. Not at all, you’re so very welcome, Miss, we’re here to attend to our friends. Listen, if the senator still has doubts about joining the club, or at least about coming to the brunch, ask him to consult the former senator Harry Badcock, now a state representative. Representative Badcock is a faithful member and

one of our most generous collaborators. I thank you, you take care.”

She hung up the phone and grabbed her purse. She hurried to the bathroom, pulling down a tight blouse that covered her ballooning torso with flowers. She came out lumpy in a short, tight, knit jacket, and with her hair newly combed. She sat on the edge of the sofa next to Megan, her grave and unmoving face turned toward her, her body turned toward the door, in starting position.

“So, Megan. The crow.”

“Well,” Megan tried to sound casual, “I was in the area and I thought, Gee, no harm in going by the clinic and just asking...”

“The crow never again appeared.”

“Oh,” Megan groaned, not knowing whether to be more concerned or less.

“But it gave Dr. Stanley a great idea!” the receptionist was excited to say.

“The crow? Gave an idea? What idea?”

“To promote crow-shooting contests here in Florida.”

Megan felt the eyelid that had been operated on fall further. She lifted it by bulging her eyes:

“A waste of time for Dr. Stanley. Hunting tournaments like crow shoots have been prohibited by law in Florida.”

“But you know how laws are. In one administration they pass, and in the next one they’re revoked. It’s a back and forth thing.”

“The truth is that as long as there are people who want to hunt, laws against hunting will make no difference.”

“But Dr. Stanley insists on operating within the strict terms of the law!” the receptionist stressed. “That’s why he wants the law against crow shoots overturned. He misses no boat. He’s the president of a hunting club that brings together legislators and lobbyists. Need I say more?”

“Yes, you do.” Megan grumbled. “Please explain to me what kind of pleasure makes powerful people spend so many resources on killing unarmed and innocent beings?”

The receptionist shook on the edge of the sofa, and tugged down on her blouse and jacket:

“It’s more complicated than that, Megan. Before judging hunters, you have to have a good understanding of the nature of hunting and death.”

“I understand the right not to be injured or murdered. And rights have to be a priority in our lives.”

“Of course it has to be a priority, far be it from me or Dr. Stanley to contradict that. It’s even in the club’s statutes, the thing about human rights.”

“I’m talking about animal rights.”

The receptionist felt hot, she pulled up the sleeves of the jacket:

“Look, in my humble opinion the food on my plate has no rights. Humans have to kill animals. Humans are at the top of the food chain, according to...”

“Wrong!” Megan interrupted. “Have you ever heard of vegans? They live perfectly well without eating animals. And I’ll bet no member of the hunting club actually eats crows.”

“I don’t know whether anyone in the club would eat a crow. There’s all kinds of tastes in this world. But that doesn’t matter at all.”

“It does matter to the crow.”

“Not if the crow knows that he is part of a greater divine project, where death is not the end but one stage of a perennial process.” She got up from the sofa and yanked the hem of the jacket over her voluminous abdomen. “Let’s go, I’m running late.”

“Wait. How do you know that the crow is aware of being part of that greater divine project?”

The receptionist sighed and armed herself with patience. She sat back down. The things that she had to do to keep her boss's clients satisfied!

"One cannot understand everything perfectly, Megan. When it comes to hunting, mysteries are more important than explanations."

"Do you think that hunted animals don't die?"

The receptionist's serene eyes strolled past the polar bear in attack position, the African crocodile with its jaws open, the moose head on the wall. She lowered her voice respectfully:

"They disincarnate. But their spirits remain. And that's not all. The spirits communicate with our world. They converse with chosen people. For example, I have a friend who's a medium who talks with the soul of a dodo from the Mauritian Isles". She looked side to side and whispered: "Just between us, she confessed to me that, no disrespect to the souls of other animals, but communicating with a bird of an extinct species was the high point of her life as a medium."

Megan broke out laughing ha ha ha ha ha hee hee hee hee hee, with the sleeve of her shirt she dried the tears that were washing the sunscreen from her face. She stopped laughing. She felt guilty. She had just shown disrespect for the religious faith of a fellow person.

The receptionist wasn't affected:

"Animals stalked by hunters know that they must die. They might give the impression that they want to resist, avoid pain, flee, live. But it's none of that."

Megan shook her head:

"It's just not possible that you actually believe what you're saying!"

"The idea may seem absurd to you, since you appear to be one of those people for animal rights or something like that. But it's out there even in a book by an intellectual." She was a little befuddled and checked her hair. "The name of the author isn't coming to me right now. Or was it more than one author? Maybe it was a woman author. Anyway, I'll try to give you a summary

of everything I've read about the subject, it goes more or less like this. The animal that's being hunted is fulfilling the function of connecting the human being with the creative force of nature, where some die so that others may live. Get it? That connection is a sacred experience because it connects the man to the animal, nature and the creator."

Megan spit out a curt sneer:

"That's stupid! There are several ways for people to connect with nature without having to murder anyone."

"Please, don't insult others' beliefs."

"But what you affirmed is a fallacy! It's a trick to disguise the sadism of hunters as something sacred, and to prevent good people from rebelling against them!"

The receptionist clutched her purse and got up. Her face was red. She neglected to pull down the hem of her jacket, which was squeezed between her bust and her stomach:

"Enough! Patience has limits. I'm not going to sit here listening to you offend Dr. Stanley and the honorable members of the club. If you, Miss, don't have culture or spirituality, it's not my problem. Please leave now."

"With pleasure!" Megan shouted, on her way out. "I've heard enough absurdities for one day. And give Dr. Stanley a message. Tell him he's lost a patient to the competition!"

She got in the car and started off. The receptionist waited for the car to go and went to the door. Before exiting, she stopped in front of the stuffed raccoon dressed as a Rastafarian and looked deep into his glass eyes:

"Did you see how aggressive that girl was, Alphonse? Luckily she doesn't like to hunt! Imagine what she might do with a gun in her hands. It's because of people like that I sometimes thank God for having created cancer."

"I know what you mean. And there are still people who don't believe in a greater divine project!" she heard the raccoon respond.



### **Treble Clef**

The sudden return of the American girl to the United States was the topic of the day among Mrs. Marcela's maids.

"She was sickly."

"She had a relapse, I bet."

"She don't trust doctors here."

"She prefers hospitals there."

"She wants her mother's care."

"God's care is greater," Silvanira mused. "He might be calling the girl to heaven already."

Deuzicreide spit in the zucchini starter, which had been prepared to calm the appetite of the lady of the house before dinner. The others pretended not to see.

"Well I reckon the foreigner fought with Diogo and left because of Mrs. Marcela," said Deuzicreide. "No one can put up with that tub of lard."

Mrs. Marcela, who was picking flowers in the yard, was feeling too happy about Megan's departure to do anything about the insult she had overheard through the window. Still she railed at the staff because it was her custom and because she hadn't anything else to do.

"Less talk and more work!" she shouted from behind a bouquet of dahlias. "If you think there's nothing to do, start looking, there's plenty."

Through the window, she saw the group of rustic ladies in their lace uniforms break up. She was pleased by the colors of the assorted vegetables on the platters and in the pots, and she tried to guess what surprises would jump from there to the dining table. She had to acknowledge, the idea of a contest to pick the most creative vegan recipe was yielding results. The dishes invented by those bumpkins were one prettier than the last one and even chic. The competition among them entertained her. As a narrative, it was an alternative to her TV soap operas, and she

followed it with equal interest. Silvanira had whipped up a cone-shaped sculpture of mashed potatoes covered with round slices of carrot, cucumber and beet root, with tufts of parsley on top and stems of celery branching out all around the base of leaves of lettuce sprinkled with sesame seeds. Deuzicreide had composed a salted manioc cake in the shape of a clown's face made up with tomatoes, olives and lentils, with a collar of white rice. A third colleague had prepared boiled peanuts with tofu brie served in a baked pumpkin. Another had produced a tray of chocolate fudge balls made with soymilk and filled with little rose buds. In the category of originality, folks were betting on the victory of a Christmas tree with a bean-paste trunk, with branches of asparagus spears adorned with berries and alfalfa sprouts, and with a slice of star fruit on top. As for best taste, no creation would surpass the traditional ensemble of rice with black beans, onion-spiked toasted manioc *farofa*, collard greens, and orange slices, which, in Mrs. Marcela's view, was a poor imitation of the full bean-and-meats stew, *feijoada*.

Silvanira was put in charge of shopping. Diogo showed her how to identify pertinent food items, to pick a little of everything, and not to bother worrying about cost. On the first day, she did the best she could in the stores of Perobinha do Campo. But Vanessa wasn't satisfied. She went to the trouble of taking Silvanira all the way to a gourmet supermarket in the fancy Jardins district of the capital city, departing at dawn and leaving behind her work on the spay and neuter campaign for dogs and cats, and returning late in the afternoon with the car full of extravagant buys. From the crates and bags the two brought there emerged, for the first time in the kitchen of the manor house, white egg plants and kumquats, Japanese mushrooms and European cucumbers, Cateto brown rice and barley sprouts, a few weird tropical fruits, a grapefruit — considered by the family to be pretty but as bitter as bile —, and a cantaloupe, that everyone found smelly but delicious.

Mrs. Marcela had only one thing against it all: the flavor of the food. Like Bezerra Leitão, Tiago and Rodrigo, she didn't understand how Diogo found enjoyment in chewing and swallowing those taste-less-ness-es. She feared that the influence of the American girl had marked their heir forever, like a

branding iron on a calf. As good as the dishes might be in terms of shape, color, plant species and spices, their appeal to the palates of the nucleus of the family didn't even come close to that of eggs, which Diogo had called chicken menstruation, of milk, which he had defined as a secretion with pus from a cow teat, of honey, which he had revealed to be bee vomit, and of meat, which he had described as putrefying muscles, veins and nerves. If it were not for the carnivores' late-night snacks of real food ordered over the phone, the culinary experiment proposed by Diogo wouldn't last more than forty-eight hours, Mrs. Marcela swore.

Vanessa took to the vegan diet more than the others. Even though she ate as much as five people would, she felt so light after finishing off dessert that she only had to vomit three times a day instead of eight.

After dinner the maids would fill several big pots with the day's leftovers and the extra food, prepared without Mrs. Marcela's knowledge, and hand them over to Zé Luiz. He would take them in the cart drawn by Chuisco in the direction of the concrete building for pigs, and as soon as he was out of sight he would take a detour with his load to the camp of the landless. There, Sparrow and the director of the Farmworkers Union, who claimed to be the parties responsible for providing the free banquet, were trying to gather support for the direct action.

Almost all the women and children welcomed the eats with curiosity and joy, as if they were a festive event following the meal prepared with the food basket from the federal government. They didn't waste a single grain of rice. If one of them was picky and rejected a dish she found odd, another, without ceremony, would be happy to be open to the novelty. Most of the men, for their parts, weren't content to have so little. Besides the humiliation of the alms, they were bitter for the lack of meat, a clear sign in their opinion of how little the suppliers of the food thought of poor folk. One of them even refused to try the repast, being suspicious it might be poisoned.

The union director Big Foot got very nervous about the process of recruiting partisans. Forced to contain his impetuous militancy not to seem he was meddling in the affairs of the camp,

where he was a stranger, he had to accept the slow pace of his front man Sparrow trying to approach potential candidates, sound out their willingness and strike up a conversation. At that rate, Big Foot complained, the landless rep would never get past introductions and arrive at some conclusion. Sparrow asked for patience. He mentioned a rumor about an infiltration of agents of the right in the camp, who supposedly were attempting to instigate some people to carry out violent protests, which were unpopular and counterproductive. The buzz, he assured his colleague, was putting everyone on edge about any issue that smelled of disorder. So Big Foot proposed they rehearse together some forms of approach that would be subtle and above suspicion. Sparrow gave the excuse that he was afraid to make a deft approach and have the subject mistake him for a homosexual. Big Foot pretended to believe in his concern and said that not only did he understand him, but that he also identified with him in that sense, but the fear of passing to others the image of a gay guy that did not correspond to reality was a typically bourgeois emotion without the slightest relevance in the context of the struggle for the anarchist revolution. He reminded him that time was slipping away and told him that he had obtained the materials to carry out the operation. He and Norato had hidden everything in the basement of the store. There were irons and stones to break down bars and walls. Wire cutters for screens, fences and electric lines. Hoes and scythes for self-defense. A crowbar. Flashlights. And three grenades.

"Grenades?" wondered a startled Sparrow. "But that's pretty dangerous." And not to seem cowardly, he added: "Hadrn't we agreed not to hurt the pigs?"

"Yes we had. But it's good to have a couple of grenades on hand in case something happens. Now try to get some men. One or two at least and we're done."

Sparrow looked at the union man out of the corner of his eye:

"And you? Can you tell me how many you've recruited?"

"Three. My two brothers and a bank clerk."

“Bank clerk? Why the hell would a bank clerk want to get into this?”

“An unemployed bank clerk, you know. A cousin of mine. Now get to it. Either you recruit someone, even if it’s a kid, or I’ll end up coming to the conclusion that you really are what you’re afraid of seeming to be.”

Sparrow swore he’d get on it. But he didn’t get far with his activism. One day before the designated day for the direct action, while he was playing cards with three kids he had invited to his tent to see if he could sign up at least one, he saw an anchor on Globo Network break into his TV set and shout that members of a landless workers faction, saying they were tired of the government’s unkept promises for settlements, had invaded the Chambers of Congress, attacked deputies, injured staff and destroyed equipment. Mayhem!, the interviewed authorities vociferated, They’re vandals!, A movement of militants who may not have land but certainly have no manners!, Those bandits and their leaders will be charged under the statutes of Crimes against National Security and they’ll get six years in jail, for under no circumstances can disrespect for democratic institutions be tolerated, as they keep open the channels of participation by the people in order to resolve political tensions in peaceful and orderly fashion, even, or better yet, principally, in the gravest crises!

The scenes of the attack on the chamber of deputies and the resulting broken glass, scares, blood and furious statements were also shown on the news between the seven o’clock evening soap opera and the eight o’clock one. Bezerra Leitão rapped on the table, Those sons of bitches! Tiago touched his napkin to his lips, What if it becomes fashionable, huh Papa? Mrs. Marcela was indignant, In my days if you coveted a piece of land you had to work hard to get it, these days folks want everything on a silver platter. Vanessa reasoned, If every poor person wanted a piece of land, how many Brazils would the land-reform agency need to settle this world of poor folk? How many chambers of deputies would those people vandalize?, Mrs. Marcela added. Diogo sensed all their eyes look his way to ask for his opinion. He got up from his chair, with a wry face:

“Why does the government take so long with land reform? This is what happens. Excuse me, I think I caught a cold.”

“It was the damp night air, my son. Go lie down and I’ll have Deuzicreide bring you a lemon-verbena tea,” Mrs. Marcela said affectionately.

“Leave Deuzicreide alone!” the heir growled. “You work those maids to the bone!”

Mrs. Marcela exchanged glances with her husband. Diogo locked himself in his room. He tried to call Megan. The answering machine picked up. He hung up.

He had let the family believe that it was he who had broken it off with Megan. What was the difference? Megan was not part of him. She didn’t belong to worlds stolen from the bodies of others. In the Bezerra Leitão context, he believed, his girlfriend had always been seen as an impossibility. Now she’d become a dead issue. Diogo would likely never touch her again, not even in Weekeewawkeeville, where the orbit of his world came closer to the orbit of her world. It was probable that he’d never see her again, except within the circle of animal rights activism, and at that with the danger of running up against the planet River.

Diogo began to be harassed by his mother as soon as he announced that Megan had made up her mind to leave. Mrs. Marcela ran back and forth suggesting he needed to do this and that, A soy hot chocolate, my son?, Help Vanessa with the campaign?, A chocolate fudge ball with rosebud?, Go with Vanessa to the market?, A bowl of *canjica* corn chowder?, Call Vanessa for dinner, Take Vanessa for a ride, Show this and that to Vanessa, Do this and that with your cousin, Vanessa here, Vanessa there. Diogo scarcely had a moment of peace to materialize his philosophical inspirations in the bathroom, Diogo!, his mother would yell, hurrying his farewell to Lacan, I need to wee, Could you pick up Vanessa at the church? He had no desire to do anything with Vanessa. He found his cousin to be silly. He began to avoid his father. He really didn’t feel like learning about the business of the farm, keeping up with reports sent by executives, checking balances, maximizing profits... all of

that was the opposite of what mattered. He filled with guilt when he passed by the wretched huts where the peons slept and when he looked at the poverty hidden by the Chinese slippers on the maids' feet. He fell ill with a sad impotence upon hearing the moaning of the cows, seeing the building for pigs and the gear for horses. When he calculated the number of lives that would be lost by the time he received his inheritance and could free the slaves, he felt that day was such a long way off. When he evaluated his own capacity to carry out his commitment to free them, he felt that day was too close. He'd get into bed, and to avenge the dubious nature of time, he'd render it useless by dialing Megan's number and hearing the answering machine.

He concluded that he had more affinities with a certain predator of animals whom he knew than he'd like to admit. He thought of calling him. He punched the buttons on the phone with disgust, hoping that the despicable patriarchal saboteur Bob Beefeater wouldn't answer. The urge to hang up struck him when he heard the phone ringing on the other end. He resisted. When you're stuck in the bottom of the well, he thought, you lose all shame and you roll around in the muck. The similarity with Bob was humiliating, but it was also useful. The chef could utilize his own experience with a former partner who was vegan to help him manage his disillusionment with his! The heir immersed himself in identification with the traitor like someone who dips his frozen feet in warm water.

Bob released his welcoming laugh and consoled him:

"It's just your first fight! You know how many I had with Sybil?"

"How many?" an avid Diogo asked.

"I lost count. But don't think I've given in. I won't give up on that hard-headed woman!"

Diogo rose from the bottom of the well to the edge, in a jet of hot water. He laughed. It was just a fight! A trifle of a fight with Megan. He was still so young, there was a whole future of fights with Megan to come! Bob laughed too, complicitly. Diogo asked about the cats.

"Treble Clef has started urinating on the doors and windows here in the house," said the chef, worried. "Must be the stress of the move. This period has been hard on everyone in the family."

"Diogo!" yelled Mrs. Marcela through the keyhole. "Go to sleep now to get up early and help Vanessa with the campaign!"

Diogo said goodbye to Bob and tossed and turned on the mattress until daybreak. When he finally fell asleep, he heard his mother knocking on the door.

"Diogo, my son, get up to take Vanessa to the church!"

He squeezed his nose to sound like he had a cold:

"I'm going to stay in bed, mother. I got some bug."

"You were out in the damp night air, yes you were. I'll have Deuzicreide prepare a garlic tea for you."

Bezerra Leitão was slurping some strong coffee from a porcelain mug.

"What was the problem this time?" he grumbled.

Mrs. Marcela smacked her lips:

"Ah, he's got a cold. He said he's going to stay in bed."

The patriarch exhaled hard:

"He's just spoiled. But what're you gonna do? We gotta be patient."

"It's that American girl's fault. She didn't do our son any good at all."

Vanessa had her vegan breakfast. She filled up on oatmeal, scrambled tofu, fruit smoothies, whole wheat bread with hummus, corn muffins, pea pie, soy hot chocolate, peanut butter cake, peach compote. She regurgitated it all and headed to the covered patio of the main church of Perobinha do Campo. The night before she had helped set up the ambulatory unit for the spay and neuter surgeries for dogs and cats, and the team was already there ready to work.

The campaign had been going on in the city for twenty years. Father Cristiano had instituted it to put an end to the shame



of so many dogs and cats in heat in his parish. At first his project encountered quite a bit of resistance on the part of the faithful, women against the cruelty of the surgery, men against the emasculation of their males. But the cleric said in a sermon that, due to the fact that animals don't have souls, they can't populate heaven after they're dead, therefore there was no reason to let them reproduce. He also said that creatures without souls serve Satan more than God, because they tempt the men of this Earth with their heats and fornications. The argument made the rounds for a few months and finally crystallized as dogma. The priest established a policy whereby part of the tithe and of the voluntary contributions to the church would be designated for the semiannual realization of the campaigns. The owners of the animals would pay as much as they could; those who couldn't pay wouldn't have to. Should there be a shortfall in covering the remuneration of the medical team or for expenses with medicines, the priest would take up a collection among his friends in the upper class. Two decades later, Perobinha do Campo was the only city in Brazil without dogs and cats roaming the streets and — the greatest source of pride for Father Cristiano — without animals copulating in full view of the faithful.

Humans began to arrive with the nonhuman patients. The dogs and cats came in cardboard boxes, wood crates, plastic bags, or on rope leashes. The shyest and smallest ones curled up in their guardians' arms. Father Cristiano, eyes puffed up and yawning, was blessing all with sprinkles of holy water.

Vanessa organized a line and checked the names of those present against the registration list. A young lady with fingernails polished green, lips painted purple, hair dyed blonde, and named Doralice had brought a sow identified as Snoopy in a shopping cart. Vanessa pretended not to recognize Mortandela and told the surgeon to sterilize her.

The next night, the organizers of the direct action met at Norato's store around cornbread and a can of guava paste to debate whether the plan would still move forward, given the repercussions of the recent events in the Chambers of Congress involving members of a faction of the landless movement. The assembly included Norato himself, Big Foot, Zé Luiz, Mizz

Orchid and the only person who had agreed to support the cause: Doralice. Goiabeira, the environmentalist, and German, the president of the regional farmworkers union, made surprise appearances determined to convince the group to desist from the direct action so as not to do further harm to the movement, in their view already quite damaged by the operation in Brasilia, which they described as an irresponsible act of vandalism. They added that if those present at the meeting didn't care one way or another what the public and the government thought about the movement as a whole, or about the comrades who attacked the Chambers of Congress as individuals, then they should bear in mind the risk of getting six years in the slammer. Six years! They should think of that! A sentence of six long years separating them from the community, curtailing the ranks of progressives, and delaying even longer the building of a just society.

Norato kept a stern expression on his face, arms crossed. He was the first to respond:

"I agree with German and Goiabeira. Better to cancel this direct action. The Norato who offered logistical support is no longer here. I want all that junk out of my basement tonight."

"Everyone is scared!" Zé Luiz added. "I mean, not me. The folks at the camp are scared. Sparrow, for example, pulled out. Ain't that right, Big Foot?"

A fuming union director contorted his face:

"And what did you expect from a weak ass who only came to meetings to eat?"

Mizz Orchid felt authorized to question the dedication of her comrade, since she was the only person to have brought someone, a woman, on board for the operation:

"But Big Foot, how come you ain't recruited nobody from the union?"

"Who could I recruit from a union with a wimp-ass president like German?" grouched the director.

German didn't bother to respond. Mizz Orchid took a long look at him. That evening the gentleman had not addressed her as politely as he had at the meeting when she debuted as an activist. He didn't seem to notice her hair tied in a bun with a lace

ribbon and her red lipstick. Mizz Orchid was jealous of Doralice. The youth and beauty of the meretricious woman must make a man find her old, like a dried up passion fruit.

“Big Foot had convinced two brothers and a cousin,” Zé Luiz informed her. “Where’re they, Big?”

“They’re mush. They don’t want nothing else to do with the idea. That’s what happens when you ask relatives for help,” Big Foot lamented.

“In that case, there’s no doubt,” said German slapping the table. “The direct action is cancelled.”

Big Foot was inflamed:

“Cancelled? Just because of the reaction to those guys breaking a few things? No way! We can’t lower our heads to the arrogance of the ruling class! The threat of punishment for the comrades who took action in the Congress has a very important meaning. It means that we’re making the elites uncomfortable!”

Mizz Orchid was inclined to agree with the director. As long as they had come this far, maybe it was better to go ahead and sabotage the owner’s profit and free as many pigs as possible.

“Big Foot assured us no one’s gonna leave no clues, ain’t that right, Big?” she cautiously confirmed.

Big Foot turned to her with eyes bursting with red:

“And so what if we leave clues? Clues be damned! The right is desperate and we have to capitalize on that desperation! We have to launch new actions!”

“Then you can count on me to let the piggies free into the woods,” Mizz Orchid decided. “You can also count on my son Zé Luiz and his girlfriend, Doralice.”

She said “his girlfriend, Doralice” with emphasis, looking at German. Big Foot bellowed:

“Why waste the critters in the woods, Mizz Orchid? We can blow a hole in the building and release the pigs on the highway! Let’s block the highway with the capitalist’s animals and with our work tools! And let’s protest, the four of us! Me,

you, Zé Luiz and Doralice! If the cops show up, we'll use the grenades."

German forgot his manners, he stood up impulsively, Have you gone nuts, man?, Big Foot's reflex was to stand, his chair fell backwards, Goiabeira caught it, Simmer down you two, Mizz Orchid jumped from her seat, Holy Mary, she tugged on Zé Luiz's sleeve. Doralice wasn't affected in the least, in her life she'd already seen everything and she didn't get pushed out of shape for any old reason. German called Big Foot's idea extremist, counterproductive, unpopular, reactionary. Big Foot shoved his union president, You're the reactionary, you're sold out, a scab. Norato separated them, Sit down the both of you, either you talk like civilized folk or take it outside, I'm in charge in the store here. The union men sat down, the trouble abated. Norato went to the basement. Mizz Orchid worked on her point of view:

"If you want my help in the direct action I'm at your service, Big Foot. Me and my son Zé Luiz." She glanced at German and said with emphasis: "And Doralice, who's his girlfriend." She sought out Big Foot's eyes: "But only if it's not to mess none with the piggies. I said so at my first meetin' and I insist on repeatin' that I reckon it's plain wrong to use them critters to do justice for people."

The director's eyes filled with tears:

"You're worried about pigs but not about the poor!... You prefer to protect the rich man's property!... You prefer to remain on the side of the capitalists!! Honestly, Mizz Orchid, I expected more from you!"

Mizz Orchid was confused. How could Big Foot think she was on the rich man's side, if she was on the side of the pigs and the poor? He was twisting words to make her feel like she was ignorant. She thought about it all.

Norato came back from the basement with a full bag and a few scythes. He opened the door, tossed the bag and the scythes in front of the store, and returned to the basement. Mizz Orchid found what she was looking for in the middle of her musings: a definitive position. She whispered into Zé Luiz's ear, who

whispered into Doralice's ear, who whispered back to them. In secret, the trio made an agreement. Mizz Orchid said out loud:

"Look here, Big Foot. If you really wanna think that I'm on the rich man's side, that's your problem. Me, my son and my future daughter-in-law, we ain't gonna help in this direct action. And that's all we got to say."

"In that case," said Goiabeira, relaxing the atmosphere with his citronella sweat, "this meeting is over."

They all went outside. Big Foot was the last to exit, sulking frown, lowered head. Goiabeira offered him a ride in his car. The director shook his head no thanks and set off on foot to the dusty road.

Norato emerged from the basement with a crowbar and some hoes and tossed them down in front of the store:

"Get this junk out of here. I want to give meetings a rest for a while. Meetings at my store, not until next year."

He went in, locked the door behind him, and opened a bottle of *cachaça*, Son of a bitch, will the headaches never end?

Mizz Orchid volunteered to take the material to her house and to get rid of it with necessary discretion. German found the idea so good that he took leave of her with a hug. She turned red, feeling her lace ribbon come undone. German helped Zé Luiz put the things in the cart and left in his car. Mizz Orchid, her son and Doralice departed in the vehicle drawn by Chuvisco. On the dirt road, they caught up with Big Foot.

"Get in, Big," Mizz Orchid invited. "We're fixin' to have another meetin' here in the cart. Let's arrange a direct action."

Big Foot was amazed:

"Are you kidding, Mizz Orchid? You said that you all were against it, shit..."

"I did say," she responded. "But it was just to hide something."

"Mother had another idea," informed Zé Luiz. "But it's gotta be just between the four of us."

“It all depends on what we negotiate, Big. If you go for it, everybody wins. Except the boss. Now get in, let’s go.”

Big Foot accepted the invitation, hopeful. He knew that countrywoman had potential! It would be better to give that clever lady another vote of confidence and enter into an agreement with her.

## Quaver

The thorazine took twenty minutes to kick in. Everything that took place after that, darkness, light, young lady turns off the cameras, darkness, light, guy comes out with a pig in a crate, darkness, light, older woman prods a sow with a big stick, darkness, light, a boom, all was lost to the memory of the caretaker and watchman at the intensive-farming building.

The plan for Doralice to participate in the direct action had been revised and almost cancelled at the last minute at Mizz Orchid's house, in the middle of the afternoon.

"Doralice, my dear," the woman said, "you reckon you really got to come on to a stranger?"

"Jeez, I'm sure used to it!" Doralice responded. "Coming on to them, that's even fun. The bad part is having to do it."

Zé Luiz was bothered, he dropped a truffle appetizer brought from the manor house:

"You don't need to say those dirty things no more, Doralice."

"That's the only way I know how," she insisted, poking a bread stick into the caper paté. "It can't go wrong. The son of a bitch will realize that they stole some pigs while he was drunk and he won't tell no one nothing."

"And what if he goes to the cops?"

"Yeah, and makes up that some thieves poured booze down his throat!" Zé Luiz imagined.

"What for?" Doralice said. "So the police can suspect him? It's easier for him to keep his trap shut and later, if he needs to, pretend there was a mistake in the pig count. Doping that bum will be my last act as a professional whore."

Zé Luiz got upset:

"Don't talk like that, Doralice. You're a lady of respect, you have a family now."

"And the family's gonna grow" Mizz Orchid added, swollen with pride.

Doralice nibbled on an artichoke tart:

"The problem is gonna be supporting the child. If we have to rely on what Zé Luiz earns..."

"I'm gonna do better," he fretted.

"Good idea! If not, I'll go back to the red-light..."

"You ain't gonna need that occupation no more," Mizz Orchid guaranteed. "We already got a roof. There's always room for one or two more. Later you can find another job. Now you gotta take care of yourself. I reckon it's better for me to sell the *caipirinha* in your place."

"I think so too, mother," said Zé Luiz. "What if the slimy guy takes advantage of Doralice? I'll kick the livin' daylights outta him!"

"There won't be time for him to take advantage," Doralice assured him.

"But what if he don't want to drink alcohol?" Mizz Orchid asked. "You could also mix the thorazine in a bottle of lemonade, just in case."

"Leave it to me, I'm gonna make the guy drink the *caipirinha*. I got a lot of practice. My clients drank the most at the whorehouse."

Zé Luiz broke off a piece of an almond saffron baguette, moping.

The only visitors the caretaker and watchman at the intensive pig-farming building normally had were the trucks from the slaughterhouse and Holy Hill. The only surprises they brought were insecticides, medicine and rations. For that reason the caretaker found it odd for a pretty young woman to show up there selling drinks off a cart with cargo covered with burlap sacks. She was a fine young thing. But boisterous, nosy, with fingernails painted green, lips painted purple. It couldn't be anything good. He didn't see because he didn't want to. He bought some *caipirinhas* to help her raise three small nephews



and support her wheelchair-bound great-aunt. He paid for one in cash, for two on credit, and drank all three, even though they were a little bitter. What happened between one glass and the other got fuzzy in his mind, but he explained to the young lady what he did there and how the video cameras worked.

It was extremely difficult for Zé Luiz to stay still in the cart, lying between Mizz Orchid and the crates beneath the burlap sacks, while his two-month pregnant fiancée was conversing with the watchman. Conversing, not in so many words, Zé Luiz thought. Who knows what that dirty guy might be doing with her... Well, if it was wrong to use animals to do justice for people, then it was wrong to use Doralice to do justice for animals. Zé Luiz was short of breath; he was on the verge of not going through with all that madness. Mizz Orchid also felt queasy, she was so nervous her belly ached, she nearly did her business in her panties.

At the moment they had planned, Doralice came out of the building and advised them that they could now enter. The three walked past the unconscious caretaker and watchman, and went down a side corridor, carrying crates.

The stench of excrement from more than a thousand pigs concentrated in a small area locked Mizz Orchid's throat and wrung vinegar from her eyes. She thought perhaps the animals liked it that way; with their sharp sense of smell, it was better for them to like it. Doralice sneezed, coughed. She told them that the caretaker had told her that the air in the building was full of hair and ammonia and gave almost all the pigs pneumonia. She pointed to where the shed crammed with young ones, females and castrated males, should be, the one the watchman called the nursery. In Zé Luiz's view, that was where they should rescue animals.

"Just from there?" whispered Mizz Orchid, pitying the pregnant sows that watched her go by.

"Didn't you say you didn't want pigs reproducing in the woods, mother?"

"I 'spose I did say."

"So."

"Piglets are easier to carry," explained Doralice. "And more small animals fit on the cart than big ones."

Mizz Orchid agreed somewhat. The idea made sense. And the piglets were old enough to get by without their mothers. But the yelps and groans of so many hundreds of pregnant Mortandelas squeezed into little prisons were as painful as knives to her ears. She avoided looking at the interminable scenes of degradation and ruin behind the bars. The images screamed to be noticed, scrambling from the cages and charging at her to display injuries, lugubrious eyes, feet sunken in shit. Mizz Orchid went thrice to the nursery. Each time she returned with a piglet in a crate, she pretended not to see the pregnant sows chewing on the bars of the cells in their futile war of teeth against iron.

From afar, on the horizon, the red eye of the afternoon spied the three liberators place a final crate on the cart and began to close. Zé Luiz covered the cargo with the burlap:

"Let's go, it's gettin' dark. I wanna release these critters in the woods before Big Foot explodes the grenade in the empty foundation for the cattle corrals."

"Me, when it goes off, I wanna be on my way home!" Doralice said. "Where's your mother?"

Zé Luiz looked around:

"She must be in the bathroom. She'll be right here."

He kept an eye on the main door of the building. Beneath his cheap watch, his veins pulsated with each microsecond of waiting.

There was no light on in Mizz Orchid's house when the niece of the owner of the farm arrived atop the gladiator Tom Cruise to verify if her order for Zé Luiz to plant Vanessa's Garden had been followed. Every week, at that hour on that day, the norm was for the smell of burnt wood to announce that Zé Luiz's supper was ready. The norm was for Vanessa, if she was nearby, to salivate in a conditioned reflex to the aroma of the smoke. The norm was for Mizz Orchid to welcome and serve her. The patriarch's niece was suspicious. She rode Tom Cruise to the pigpen. All the starter plants in plastic bags and identified with tags had been removed. The pen had been returned to the pigs.

She formed her model's lips into a bossy beak. She got off the horse, tied him to a branch of the tabebuia and kicked open the gate of the pigsty with her riding boots. The pigs were scared off to the woods. Last of all came a slow Mortandela, convalescing from the surgery.

Vanessa felt the ardor of proprietary wrinkles between her eyebrows. She sat down by the door of the house. She would not budge from there until she had ascertained exactly what intentions Mizz Orchid and her son had. And she would only rest easy after having a serious talk with her uncle demanding the immediate dismissal of those two ingrates.

In front of the building, Zé Luiz and Doralice were pained by Mizz Orchid's delay.

"Mother's gonna spoil everything," he sniffled.

"It must be nervous diarrhea, poor thing."

"I'm gonna wait just one more minute. Then I'm gonna go in there and yank her out of the toilet by force."

Then the pregnant sows began to exit through the door. One, two, three, four. And finally Mizz Orchid, prodding the last one with a big stick.

"Mother, have you gone nuts??? That's not what we agreed to!"

"Shut up and help me with this one!" Mizz Orchid cried. "She's stuck."

The fourth sow was wailing. She didn't want to get up from the ground, with her heavy belly and legs crippled by the inertia of confinement. Confused, she was frightening the others with her cries. They waddled off squealing, in a mock race, one in one direction, two in the other. Zé Luiz tried to scare them toward the woods. They forced their swollen legs to run a little farther and then stopped. They stared at Zé Luiz from afar. He ran at them waving his arms:

"What're you doin' there you dopes? Get goin' to the woods, dummies!" They let out cries and moved a little farther. They halted. Zé Luiz ran back to the cart: "Let's go, mother, leave that sow there, it's too late!"

Mizz Orchid had snatched a sack from the top of the crates and was trying to stuff the front of the sow into it. She got bit. Doralice came to her aid and rubbed saliva on the injury on her hand. The sow was shaking and squealing. Chuisco was alarmed and jerked the cart. The piglets squeaked loudly in the crates. Zé Luiz shouted:

“Let’s go you two, Big Foot must already be over at the cow corral foundations!”

Mizz Orchid was stubborn:

“I ain’t leavin’ here without this poor thing. You shut up and help me, my goodness!”

Zé Luiz got another sack, tied the legs of the freed sow and, together with his mother, carried her to the cart.

At that instant the explosion happened. Chuisco bucked, whinnied, and departed with his cargo of terrified children. Doralice tried to catch up with the cart, Whoa Chuisco, hold it you bastard! But a second explosion scared the horse even more, and he took off into the dark of the night.

Mother and son embraced stupefied:

“What the hell was that boom?”

Doralice ran back to them:

“Hadn’t Big Foot agreed that he was gonna explode just one grenade?”

“That’s what he agreed,” responded Zé Luiz. “You all saw him agree, we were all together in the cart!”

There was a third explosion. Doralice stabbed her green fingernails into her blond hair:

“Son of a bitch! We’re screwed...”

Vanessa wasn’t able to tell if the booms from the other side of the woods were gunshots or firecrackers. But she’d wager that Mizz Orchid had something to do with them. Her hypothesis was proven when Chuisco galloped up, hitched to the driverless cart. He stopped at the entrance to the stable, where there was a trough of water, and dipped his mouth in. From his cargo the squeals of the piglets reached Vanessa.

The episode surprised Diogo with his bags packed to return to Weekeewawkeeville. He was enjoying his final moments of masochistic lethargy on the bed, making time pass more quickly by having a conversation with his new friend and advisor in affairs of the heart, Bob Beefeater, about Quaver, Treble Clef, the demise of the oceans, the greenhouse effect and vegan former girlfriends, when Mrs. Marcela pounded her fists on the door of his room and shouted:

“Open this damn door, you brat! The world is falling apart and you’re holed up in your room? Show some consideration for your parents!”

Confused, he let her in:

“Sorry, mother... What is it...?”

“They blew up the foundations for the concrete cattle corrals!” she fanned herself, huffing and puffing. “And they let loose a bunch of pigs from their building! Your father has to have those bandits arrested! Kill them one by one, if need be! If not, before long they will blow up the manor house too!”

Bezerra Leitão came in next, hand on his chest, pallid face.

“It was the workers, I’m sure,” he said with his voice fading. “In league with the union and the environmentalist. Orchid and Zé Luiz are involved. I’m going to fire them and expel everyone from my lands. I’m going to contract hands from the outside.”

He lost his breath and began to feel woozy. Mrs. Marcela went to get Deuzicreide to fix him a glass of water with sugar.

Diogo was astonished. He stammered an opinion:

“But isn’t it better to wait for the investigation to conclude first, father? Otherwise you run the risk of turning innocent folk out on the street...”

The patriarch chased air with his mouth wide open.

“Vandalism... that’s contagious...” he gasped. “If we don’t react right away, the terrorists will damage other properties... Or do you have a solution better than mine, my son?”

Diogo wasn't sure what to say. He did have several suggestions. But only one seemed right. He could suggest to his father that he not fire anyone and that he leave things as they were. Or that he not fire anyone and that he negotiate better working conditions for the employees. Or that he not fire anyone, that he negotiate better working conditions for the employees and that he revert from intensive farming to organic farming. Those three initiatives could better the lives of the humans. Only the last one could reduce a little the suffering of the animals. But all those suggestions were mere charity, degrading to both exploited groups, humans and nonhumans. And all were based on the idea that animals are things to be used by people... Diogo massaged his forehead with the tips of his fingers. How to explain to Bezerra Leitão that the only right path was to free the slaves, and veganize and collectivize the farms? How to make his father understand that all other paths lead back to the old and unjust starting point?

"Talk to mother and put all the properties in my name now, father!" he heard himself say, obeying a strange command. "I'll cancel my trip, I'll drop out of school! Talk to the lawyers! I'm willing to assume command and the inheritance as soon as tomorrow, if possible."

Bezerra Leitão looked straight at his son. He had a coughing fit. He fell silent. Then he said:

"Not so soon, boy. Go back to the United States. Finish your degree, get your diploma. Then we'll see about all this."

His face was blue. Mrs. Marcela hurried into the room with Deuzicreide. The maid had a glass of water with spit and sugar on a silver platter. Mrs. Marcela did mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on her husband. Diogo called an ambulance.

The direct action occupied two pages of the *Correio Perobinha-campense* for a week. Mrs. Marcela was finally having her face appear in the newspaper — not in the social column she had so desired, but rather on the front page, below headlines and referrals to the crime section, which caused her quite a bit of psychological and physical stress. Zé Luiz and Mizz Orchid were regarded as the principal parties responsible for the acts of violence against the patriarch's property. Neither

mentioned Doralice, who was also left out of the statement by the caretaker and watchman of the building. He told the police that Zé Luiz and Mizz Orchid had pointed a gun at him and forced him to drink drug-laced *caipirinha*. A third member of the gang had supposedly supplied the other two with the three grenades that damaged the still-empty foundation of the enormous concrete corral where the owner was planning to confine his cattle permanently. As those grenades were used exclusively by the Armed Forces, the police were studying the possibility of looking for the third terrorist among the corporals and soldiers of the army.

Bezerra Leitão had to be admitted to the hospital. In his bed there, he had plenty of time to calculate his losses, to receive from his lawyer assurances that his rural insurance policy would cover all the costs to fix the vandalized property, to see to it that all peons and farmworkers were let go, to think about the need to bulletproof his cars and contract bodyguards and gunmen, and to converse with his wife about the future.

All the pigs freed from the building were captured and returned to their cells.

Nobody had the time to bother with Mortandela and her group of barrows in the woods.

**Fusa: Thirty-second Note**

Dr. Stanley's receptionist sets up the front room of the hunting club for the quarterly brunch. She moves the stuffed deceased up against the wall to create free space between them and the folding table, on which the appetizing morgue will be displayed. She spreads out a white tablecloth. At each end of the table, she erects a mausoleum of stacked plates and champagne buckets filled with silverware. She sets out the napkins, bandages for bloody mouths. She looks at the clock. Ten to ten. In ten minutes the platoon of diners will arrive with punctual appetites and entombing stomachs. The receptionist starts to get rattled. She runs to the kitchen to get the bottles that will fill a vast cooler installed under the moose head attached to the wall. She re-reads the list of fifteen dishes people are bringing. The main one, a deer brought down in the governor's private hunting grounds, will occupy the center of the table, degraded into venison stroganoff. Another highlight will be the roast beef of Representative Harry Badcock, next to the vase of lilies. Some space could be negotiated for the mashed potatoes brought by the state senator's intern. She said she'd get take-out at the supermarket because she doesn't know how to cook. Unfortunately she'll be coming alone. The senator didn't respond to the invitation.

Bag of bottles in hand, the receptionist returns to the front room. She's surprised to see an item in the middle of the table that was not there before. Salient against the white tablecloth, a stuffed crow arches his wings with his beak open in fighting position. She's enthralled. It's a transcendent moment! The spirit that had opened a door to the ineffable for Dr. Stanley has just come back to the domain of its chosen one! It wants to pay homage to him with its stuffed version, just as the hunter returns to nature to honor animals with the bullets of his rifle. The receptionist dares not profane that unique instant. She backs up to the kitchen, eyes fixed on the crow, bag of bottles in hand.

Seven to ten. The impact of the crow's presence attenuates in the receptionist's heart and she's once again in a condition to fill the cooler with bottles. Reverently, she crosses



the threshold to the front room. She halts. Next to the crow there is another one in fighting position. She returns to the kitchen, leaving the door cracked open behind her.

For a few seconds she admits the possibility of someone having put the crows there without her seeing. She goes outside and looks around. The club sits a fair distance from any other house in a dead area of the city. She sees no car besides her own. She sees no one. She takes another look in the yard and returns to the kitchen. She's by herself, no doubt. She's ashamed of her lapse. She questioned her own faith! Where would she end up if she decided to accept obvious explanations for things that disturb her? Clearly she'd become a deluded and rebellious person, like the patient with the basal cell on her eyelid incapable of seeing a spiritual instrument in the hunter's weapon.

Bag of bottles in hand, eyes on the floor, the receptionist returns to the front room. She slowly raises her eyelids and moves her irises toward the crows. Lord in heaven! Instead of two, now there are four! They're all arched. They all seem aggressive. Why? The one that Dr. Stanley had filmed with his camera had shown himself to be so docile when he followed him... Who are the crows fighting with? The receptionist feels a shiver. Could the spirits be angry with her? Could they be mad at the club? She lets go of the bag, runs to the kitchen, slams the door behind her. She closes her eyes, murmurs a prayer. Forgive me, Creator, for doubting Thy designs again.

She consults the clock. Two minutes to ten. She hears the sound of cars. The members of the club are arriving and she still hasn't put the bottles in the cooler. She takes a deep breath, tugs her tight blouse over her immense belly. She opens the door to the front room. A movement draws her attention to the window. Through the glass, she sees a black spirit floating over the walk and taking the shape of a crow.

The terror of a child in a dark room strangles the receptionist. She closes her eyes and prays in silence. I ask the Creator for forgiveness, I ask the Creator for forgiveness in the name of men, I ask the Creator for forgiveness in the name of all men who kill, I ask the Creator for forgiveness in the name of all men who kill Thy Creation. She hears a bang and a rumble. Dr.

Stanley's motorcycle has come to tear her from her mystical trance. A hubbub of voices and cars gets her back to the clear Sunday morning. She goes out on the veranda.

On the walk in front of the club someone's waving a black flag with the figure of a crow on it. Three individuals are carrying signs and chanting We Want Animal Rights, When?, Now! One sign reads Abolish Hunting and All Animal Exploitation. On another, Veganism Against Hunters' Sadism. A third says Killing is Devastation, Veganism is Conservation. A couple pulls up in a car and joins the protest with a banner reading Animals Are Not Property, Animals Are Persons. A woman jumps off her bicycle to cover the story with her cellular telephone.

Confused, some members of the club are paralyzed in the parking area, standing by their cars. Others, gripping their delicacies, march into the front room behind their president. The most generous and assiduous affiliate, Rep. Harry Badcock, doesn't even bother to take his hands off the steering wheel of his Hummer. As soon as he sees the activists, he peels out, heading at anyone in his way. Clowns are for the circus!, he vociferates through the crack in the window at the lens of a camera hooked to a laptop and operated by River, who's recording everything and doing voice-over narration.

At the front door, the governor is unsure whether to speak up or stay quiet. He doesn't really know what decision would lead to more votes in a presidential run he dreams of. From the walk, River captures his face in a close-up and shouts, Mr. Governor, isn't it immoral to promote the killing of animals for pleasure? One of the politician's bodyguards covers the lens of the camera with his hand and another shoves the activist. He resists, he warns, All this is being broadcast to big screens in different states around the country! The governor pulls his men back and approaches, Excuse me, young man, screens where? River takes another close-up, Big outdoor screens, governor, in the capital cities of Florida, New York, Wisconsin, California and Massachusetts, where demonstrations are also taking place, and afterwards all the reporting on this event will be accessible to

millions of people on our group's website, Why are you supporting the idea of re-establishing those hunting tournaments?

The governor ponders, Son of a bitch, how did the idea leak?, You really can't trust club members, It's better to deny everything and take advantage of the exposure on those screens of theirs, If less than five percent of Americans still hunt and the percentage is still falling, only a dope would waste his time on some puny state law for tournaments. He turns a calm and tan face to the camera, I don't know what you are referring to, my son, there are no plans in that regard, but I should point out that during my administration we more than doubled the national average for creation of summer jobs for students... River interrupts him, So you do consider tournaments to shoot crows and other animals to be immoral? Allow me to finish, says the governor, we also invested five hundred million dollars to pave ecological parks... Dr. Stanley sticks his nose in the frame, Get out of here!, he shouts at River, I will not allow extremists to disrupt the activities of the hunting club, you'll be punished under the anti-terrorism act, I've already called the police! The governor dexterously regains the attention of the camera, I'd say to my friend Dr. Stanley that there's no need for police here, as these young men and women are expressing their ideas peacefully in a public place and their right is guaranteed by the constitution, Speaking of the constitution, in the past year we succeeded in examining two proposals to institute subsidies for beer consumption in places frequented by the youth of Florida... River insists, Governor, American citizens are awaiting your response to my question! Dr. Stanley pulls the camera toward his own face, he growls, The poor man cannot respond because he feels intimidated by you, but *I* will make the hunting club's position clear, I'm the president! The situation is awkward for the governor, he says, Dr. Stanley, that's not necessary. The dermatologist is obstinate, Let me speak, governor, get the stroganoff made with the deer that you bagged, take it to the dining room, and let me speak, or doesn't the constitution guarantee me that right? A discomfited governor smiles on the screens. Dr. Stanley faces the lens, his speech commences, Hunting tournaments are a healthy and festive activity, They help eliminate pests that destroy crops and forests, Anyone who

doubts that can ask the conservationists affiliated with our club, Hunting tournaments need to be allowed in Florida so that honest taxpayers, like the members of our association, can help conserve the health of agriculture and the environment, respecting law and order. River responds, Killing is not conservation, it's devastation, and animal rights advocates will continue struggling for the prohibition of hunting all over this land! The activists repeat several times the slogan Killing is Devastation, Veganism is Conservation! and River aims the camera at them. The governor positions himself in front of the lens, Permit me to clarify one point, my young friends, the president of the club is surely mistaken about one thing, I do not have a stake, nor will I, in the re-establishment of those tournaments aaaaaah!!!!, he shouts running away.

He flees from the Hummer of Rep. Harry Badcock who has just resurfaced and is driving toward the walk in a spectacular maneuver. River hides behind an oak and broadcasts the scene. Badcock jumps from his vehicle with a rifle and shoots three rounds into the air. The governor's bodyguards shove their chief into the car, pointing their guns at the representative. Dr. Stanley jumps on them, Are you crazy?, careful not to hurt the man! The bodyguards get in their cars, whisk the governor away along with his venison stroganoff. Full of comradeship, Dr. Stanley addresses Rep. Badcock, he smiles, Harry, please, put that gun down, let's go in, the police are coming to take care of these criminals. Rep. Badcock responds with another shot in the air.

Dr. Stanley runs for the dining room. Those who are still in the parking area jump in their cars and flee. The activists get their signs and banner and take off in their vehicles. Diogo, who's bearing the flag, throws it in his automobile and runs to the back of the club. In the dining room, affiliates look at the shooter through the window. Megan comes out of a closet where she's been hiding since nine-thirty in the morning and grabs back from the table the four faux crows with artificial feathers. She stuffs them in her backpack, escapes by the kitchen door, and runs into Diogo. He takes her by the hand and pulls her over to his car. She's worried, What about River?

River keeps the representative in the sights of his lens, he shouts from behind the tree, Representative Harry Badcock, these images of you are being sent to big screens in five states, put down that weapon! The politician points his rifle at the camera, he thunders, This is a democratic country, democratic laws are made according to the will of the majority and not under pressure from a handful of terrorists for animal rights, Now get out of here, you brat! He shoots the roots of the oak. River cowers behind the trunk of the tree holding the equipment close to his chest. Another bullet flies at the base of the tree. Diogo pulls the car up and Megan, in the back seat, opens the door for River, who hops in. The car zigzags off, challenging Badcock's aim.

The representative is now alone and lets off a few more rounds like someone having fun with fireworks. He targets bushes, insects and the wind. He hears the police siren and brings the sound into his sights. As soon as the cop car shows up, he puts a bullet in its windshield and another in one of the tires. He tries to shoot one more time but he's out of ammunition. He throws the rifle down on the walk. He is detained by the police when he goes to his Hummer to fetch the roast beef.

The activists gather six blocks away, in a parking lot behind a motel. Megan, River and Diogo are scared to no end. River embraces the Brazilian, he's nearly in tears, You saved my life, thank you. That's what friends are for, Diogo responds without a return hug. One of the participants distributes cups of water to his fellow protestors. Megan calls Sybil, who watched the demonstration in Boston, Yes everything's OK, mom, you can rest easy, no activist was hurt and as far as I know no one in the club either, all of us are here, you can tell me the news and pass it along to the others, What? The representative's shooting spree made our protest national headlines on TV? Wow! And when his gun aims at the camera the audience identify with hunted animals! That's terrific, mom! The cell of another woman rings, it's an activist friend from New York who's set up a clearinghouse for information about all the protests. She repeats what he says: Enormous lines to sign the petition to end hunting and all animal exploitation! Fifteen thousand educational pamphlets about animal rights and veganism distributed! Further sharing of information received by phone energizes the group

even more, in accordance with a tacit and almost unconscious universal etiquette: not criticizing any aspect of a recently concluded and productive action.

The demonstrators begin to leave the locale. Diogo starts the car. At his side, Megan turns around. River leans forward and devours his girlfriend in a kiss. Diogo's eyes fulminate the rearview mirror, The Perfect Guy likes the taste of sunscreen, he figures. He tries to separate their voracious lips with a question, Whose idea was it to use the club's wireless Internet connection to transmit everything to the big screens, huh? No answer. He knows it was River's idea, but he has to disengage those tongues of theirs. He had a criticism, It worked out, but what if the connection had been weak or down?, then lots of the movement's resources and time might have been wasted for nothing, don't you think, River? Silence. Diogo persists, a little louder, Sure this protest, together with the pamphlets, must have educated someone, but don't you think, River, that there was no need for Megan to take such a risk, invading the property to scare the receptionist with the faux stuffed animals? Megan's trunk bends toward the back seat by dint of the suction of River's mouth on hers. Her hip points up, next to Diogo's face. The Brazilian is exasperated, What's not going to help much is people saying that the representative shot at the cops because he went crazy, but that's what's crazy, them thinking that a hunter who shoots people is either crazy or a criminal, but a hunter who shoots animals is normal, when the truth is that they're both the same thing, am I right or not, you guys? Megan's feet pass by his face and dive behind his seat. The rearview goes clear. Megan and River, the driver concludes, are all over each other, lying together in *his* car. He accelerates over a speed bump, he hears an Ouch! The rearview fragments the couple's body sitting on the seat. The mouths have been separated.

River gets out at his apartment and Megan goes on with Diogo in the direction of Sybil's house. Megan applies sunblock on the spots of her skin washed by the saliva of her boyfriend. She cleans the lenses of her dark glasses. Diogo muses. All distaste for kissing sunscreen aside, he must recognize that he still loves that kitten and his heart aches that he is no longer included in her plan for an adoptive family. What's worse, even

though he's aware that Megan and all other animals are no one's property, there's a bitter taste in his mouth, a macho sensation of having lost her to his rival, or of having returned her to her true owner, after a couple of years on loan.

Are you going to live with Sybil for a long time?, he moans. I don't intend to, she says, No matter how cool my mom may be, I'm too old to be under her wing still. I agree, he says, but I'd go farther, I think you should preserve your independence and not live with River either. Megan falls silent. He resumes the conversation, Is everything ready for your mom's arrival? Quite ready!, Megan exclaims, I've even adopted all the black cats from the local shelter, By the way I want to thank you again for agreeing to be the lone guardian of the companions I took in. Diogo wants her to look at him, he blackmails her, They're always expecting you to visit. She's quiet. He continues the thread, And the two kittens that I named Fusa and Semifusa, are they also coming with your mother?, I'd like to see them again. They're not coming, Megan replies, Bob's still their guardian.

They arrive at Sybil's two-story red-brick house, a combination of Tudor, Victorian and neoclassical styles, with arches, pointed roof and a big chimney. Over the windows decorated with flower pots, green canvas awnings are reminiscent of eyelids with eyeshadow. A ceramic walkway divides the front yard in two parts up to the door. On the left side lined with a lawn, a magnolia, a sweet gum, and a Canary palm tree fan three hibiscus plants and a crape myrtle. On the right side, with jasmine ground cover, two camellia bushes, side by side, listen to a Cuban palm rustle at a lamppost and the mailbox.

Diogo parks the car in the garage down the driveway. In the backyard, hedges of ligustrums and azaleas line the edges of a lawn with an area for cats to which the habitués have access through a small passageway installed in the lower part of the kitchen door. Diogo examines the wire fence that surrounds the cats' area; it's not overly visible but very resistant, held up by thin metal posts, very high and a little wobbly, curled inwards at the top and the bottom; it has no gaps, no support for a feline impulse, and is endowed with an escape-proof gate. Three black cats stand out on the grass. One chews on blades of grass, another

on a recently captured lizard. The eyes of the third, two holes leaking the verdure of the plants, are fixed on Diogo, wary of any danger. Diogo is enthused, If the kittens don't have names, I'd like to baptize them as F-Sharp, B-Flat and E-Minor. Megan giggles, River already named all three, Byron, Einstein, and Voltaire. Diogo protests, Gimme a break, I'm the one who first had the idea to give the animals names of talented people listed on the Internet as vegetarians! She changes the subject, Let's put the things away.

The two put the flag and the faux crows with artificial feathers inside a trunk in the garage. Please, Megan says, don't forget to thank Diego and the Milanese aristocrat for the donation of the flag and the stuffed crows, tell them that the birds will be sold to raise funds for the cause. Diogo doesn't hear her, he's tormented by something else, he grumbles, How's life together? She responds, Diego and the Milanese baron?, how should I know?, ask your brother. Diogo laughs, he tries to hug her. I'm not talking about their life, silly. She escapes from the hug, she steps back. Diogo continues, I want to know how your relationship with River is going. She stares at him with her sunglasses, Very well, as it should be, because River and I have so much in common! Diogo is disdainful, In my humble opinion a relationship where two people go together well in everything is friggin' boring. Megan looks down sadly. He says he's sorry, It's just my opinion, you dope, it's not worth much, the truth is that a relationship with you is never boring. She whispers, Well the only problem with my relationship with River is precisely me, I'm an incurable paranoid. Diogo holds her hands, Megan, you mean you're smoking marijuana again?, why do you do that if it makes you paranoid? She frees herself of his hands, I'm not talking about marijuana paranoia, I mean that childish insecurity in relation to my mother. Diogo wrinkles his forehead, What does that have to do with River? Megan turns her back on him, she trembles, I-I-I think that River wants... wants to be with my mom. Bullshit!, Diogo mocks, how can anyone even look at Sybil, with a pretty, cool and sexy girl like you at his side? He shuts up. He reflects. He puts his hands on Megan's shoulders, turns her toward him. He speaks slowly, artfully, On the other hand there's no harm in being smart about things, honey, Where there's smoke



there's fire, you know, In your shoes I wouldn't facilitate things for the two of them. Megan goes to the door, dumbfounded, without saying goodbye. He almost feels pity. He shouts, If you need me, honey, just call. She complains, Stop calling me honey.

At the supermarket, Diogo composes his lunch with whole-wheat pita bread, a container of hummus, a little tray of tabouli and another of avocado sushi with pure algae. He selects a fruit salad. He picks out the smallest bar of dark chocolate from the candy shelf. On the way home, he makes plans to look for news of the representative's shoot-out on TV and the Internet, and later to study dendrology until it's time to open his doors to the activists to analyze the action at the Hunting Club of Weekeewawkeeville.

A neighbor approaches him as he gets out of his car in the garage. She gives him a letter from Marcela Gallo Sardinha Bezerra Leitão, addressed to him, but with the wrong house number. It arrived three days ago, she says, only today did I remember to give it to you, sorry. Diogo goes in the house; Kafka, Marguerite Yourcenar and Mahatma Gandhi celebrate his entry. He sits on the sofa, accommodates Mary Shelley on his lap and reads his correspondence.

*Perobinha do Campo, 10 May*

*God bles you my dear son Diogo*

*I hope your studies are going very well, only this way God will help you be successful in the career that you have chosen. With a nice profession you will stand out in American society and meet a good girl that deserves you. Your father and I hope that one day you will realize our dream of having beautiful grandchildren carrying the family name, but I'm afraid your parents won't be able to see that day.*

*I am writing to you from the house of your godmother Antonia. Your father and I came to spend a few days in São Paulo to have exams in the Albert Einstein Hospital.*

*Unfortunately my helth is getting worse. Last month they diagnosed a diabetes and the doctor said that my colesterol was*

way above normal and he put me on a diet to lose weight. He cut out the things I like the most he cut out the eggnogg with whiskey, he cut out the cheese and guava paste roly poly , he cut out sausage, fried pork rhinds and bacon bits. Ever since I started the diet I have been feeling so sad. Your father even made a comment, he said Marcela, you look like the cow separated from her calf. Not being able to eat anything I don't feel like doing anything, not even to recieve high society. I don't want the priest to go to the manor house any more because he's such an eater and I'm not going to sit there watching him eat. So the manor house is like a cemetery. The doctor said that my colesterol level is falling but I think he said that just to calm me down because he knows that I'm going to die soon and he doesn't have the courage to tell me.

Unfortunately your father is worse off than me, poor man. Last week he was diagnosed with a spot on his right lung and he has to have an operation for them to do a byopsy. It's so sad to see a hard working man like him strong as a bull (even limping) turn into a weak and exausted old man overnight. He doesn't go outside even to smoke. One day I felt so sorry for him that I said he could smoke in bed. But he told me that he cant smoke any more because the doctor prohibitted him. The doctor prohibitted us from the things we like the most. That's not life for us folks. I don't know what's the point of living like an animal.

But I'm writing you this letter to prepare you for the last will and testament that your father and I are writing together with the lawyer in a rase against time. I don't want you to be disapointed when you see the will because it will not say what your father had promised you. Your father and me conversed a lot about every thing that happened on the farm during your stay there, we analiezed the ideas that you have about animals and workers and we came to the conclusion that we are going to sell all the farms in the center west and the postfarmgate business. To use the words of your father, the livestock farming cultural patrimony built by the Bezerra Leitão family will only be preserved if it stays in the hands of professionals with a true vocation for the business. Unfortunately none of our sons, not even you Diogo, was born with that gift. The money from the sale will be divided in two parts: half for you and half for your three

brothers. With your inheritance you will be in a position to buy a forest to be able to work in the profession you will graduate in. I'm not real sure what your job will be but my guess is that you could raise many wild animals in threat of extinction, with great possibilities for profit since theres a big demand for animals in extinction in zoos all over the world.

Your father complained a lot about leaving so much money for your brothers but I took advantage of his fralety and I was stubborn, I said That's mean to the boys, Bezerra, if Christ forgave his exacutioners then you too can forgive your sons. Your father cried but he agreed. He also said you deserve a bigger chunk because one day you said you were going to use cow dung to fertilize the crops on the farm. That's your father, a softie, who cherishes so much the memories that make him happy.

You must be asking your self if the Fazenda Mato Grosso is not part of the sale. Its not, my son, because we decided to leave the Mato Grosso Farm to your cousin Vanessa. Even though she's a woman, she has shown she has a firm hand when dealing with the workers. She also likes plants, she knows their names in Latin and she loves animals, and she knows how to tell the diference between pets and farm animals. We have hope for Vanessa knowing how to choose a good husband to help her get the farm moving because we're going to help her to look. We're just a little worried about her health because we noticed that every meal after she eats she vomits. I had Deuzicreide keep an eye on her all day and Deuzicreide said that she doesn't vomit except at meal times. So I think that the problem is that pile of vegetables that she started eating lately.

Well son that's about all. My hand is starting to hurt from so much writing because Im not used to it, all though the doctor said that I have arthritis.

Your father and your godmother send you blessings.

An affectionate hug from your mother

Marcela

P.S. Your father told me to say that he made up his mind to grant your request not to use Unicorn and Trotamundos for anything and now the two horses run around the farm with

*nothing to do. Your father also told me to say that he did not replace them with other animals to do what they used to do.*

Diogo re-reads the letter. He wants to phone his mother, ask her if she's better, if his father has already had his operation. He wants to tell her that if she needs her son, all she has to do is ask. But first he wants to call Megan. He dials the number so quickly that he misdials, he curses, re-dials.

She answers. He pants, Honey, it's me, look, listen carefully, my parents are selling the farms, they're lifting that weight off my shoulders. She asks, Were you disinherited? No, he says, I'm going to receive half of the proceeds from the sale. She gets mad, That doesn't change anything, the animals will continue to suffer at the hands of another exploiter. He insists, That at least changes my situation, honey... She cuts him off, That inheritance is dirty money that's going to be laundered and stop calling me honey. He continues, Megan, be reasonable, look, in practice my parents' decision turns my status as future owner of animal agribusiness into future philanthropist! He stops talking and awaits the effect of the news on the mood of his beloved. She doesn't respond. Philanthropist, Megan, he is excited to say, I use the word philanthropist because a better word doesn't occur to me right now, but what I mean is that I'm going to use part of that money to develop veganic agroforests and the rest to educate the greatest possible number of people about animal rights, abolition and veganism! He stays silent, hoping to hear a positive comment. She takes her time to say something. Finally she says gently, That's very, very cool, Diogo. He has a request, I'm counting on you to help me, honey. She lets out a long sigh and responds, Yes you can count on me. And she doesn't complain about being called honey.

**Semifusa: Sixty-fourth Note**

Bob arranged the cat carrier with Fusa and Semifusa on the seat next to him and took the draft of his recipe book from his briefcase. He re-read the opening passage, took a look at the middle, and tested out the end. He checked off a few things, took a few notes, and corrected here and there. He decided to keep a few parts that he had chosen to exclude when he was in the departure lounge, but then lined them out again. It was hard to guess what his implicit reader would find irresistible! He is the author of the book, but Sybil's judgment commands the motion of the pen, of the sword against words, of the knife on the ingredients. Bob put the draft and the pen away in his briefcase. He promised himself that he wouldn't make any more changes until Sybil agreed to write the preface.

The plane took off. Bob poked a finger through the bars of the cage for Fusa and Semifusa to smell. He felt their furry chins rubbing against it. He asked the kitties to forgive him for forcing them to endure the nightmare of a trip they had no interest in. He promised not to inconvenience them again. His attempt at justification was that their presence would be a nice surprise for Diogo, who had secretly provided him Sybil's address. It might also be a way to assuage the feminist's fright at his unannounced visit, softening her heart, inspiring a welcoming disposition in her. For the chef was bringing her some revolutionary news and an important proposal! Sybil just must listen to him! She had to see the recently created line of economically, environmentally and ethically sustainable food products developed to compete with lab meat and endorsed by Bob Beefeater! She had to learn about their formulas, their history, their benefits! She would discover that the innovative process was inspired in an ancient Chinese Buddhist vegan technique! She would be convinced that the project meant the end of humans' consumption of meats, eggs, milk, and honey! And if, after learning all the facts, that picky woman still refused to write the preface, she could consider other ways to show her support for the recipe book. For example, she could publish a review on a

website, or simply offer a word of praise with an exclamation mark, followed by her name and occupation, on the dustcover of the hardbound edition. It wouldn't cost her a thing! What did she have to lose? Who did she think she was? Sometimes Bob got so mad... If he only could, he'd rap his knuckles on her head. He slipped his fingers into his shirt pocket, fished out a container of tranquilizers, and swallowed two tablets. He covered his eyes with a sleeping mask and leaned back on the headrest.

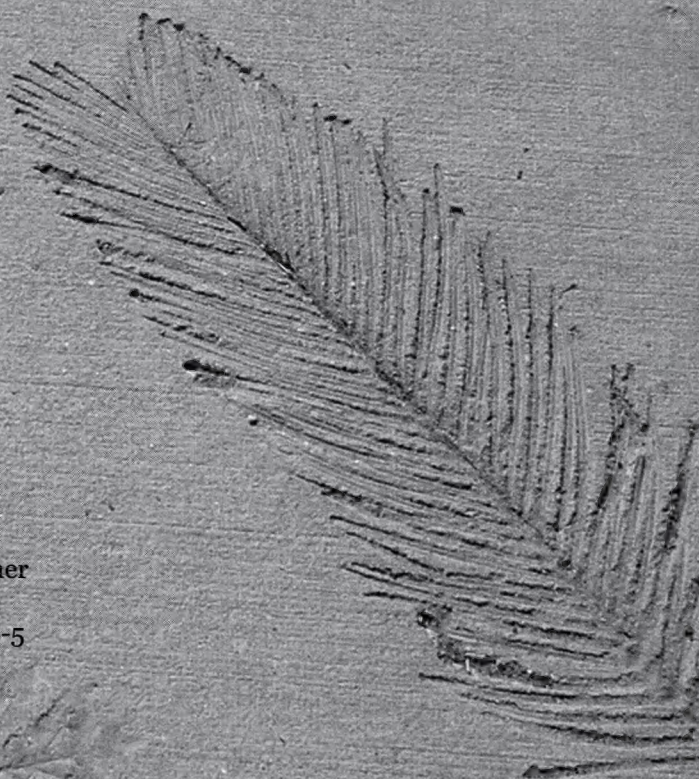
He felt humiliated. What would he do if after all his efforts to rekindle with Sybil she still refused to see him? What if she agreed to meet with him but didn't want to taste his samples? What he really wanted to do, he had to admit, was to kidnap her, rub her nose in the literature about the new project and shout, Look here, you fundamentalist vegan, you sectarian feminist, you fanatical purist, you pigheaded do-gooder, The special line of food that I've been trying to show you for months, it's all made of plants! Plants, plants, plants, now do you get it? Plants that taste like animal products and that have a similar consistency! Yes, now you understand! Cereals, fruits, greens, legumes, seeds, and roots that taste like and have the consistency of meat, milk, eggs and honey! Vegetables refined in the lab to satisfy the palate of the most demanding and relentless omnivores! Look at the photos, read the opinions! Consult the results of the product research! Thanks to the labor of our engineers, a turkey thigh can be replaced by an asparagus spear! A serving of caviar by pomegranate seeds and goop! Thick slices of regular eggplant pass for steaks, bananas for sausage, and round scarlet eggplant for lamb testicles! Our mango juice tastes like cow milk and our kiwis like chicken eggs! Read these brochures that I'm rubbing in your nose, Sybil, try my recipes, approve them and endorse them! Recommend these plants that taste like meat! Meat, Sybil, still meat! Meat, even if by a thread...





*Humana Festa, A Novel* is an original, pioneer work of contemporary literature in that it dwells upon veganism and animal rights. Exploring connections between feminism, the environment, and the abolition of animal exploitation, *Humana Festa, A Novel* narrates the relationship between Megan, a young American woman who advocates for vegan causes, and the Brazilian Diogo, a college student of Forestry in the USA who stands to inherit his wealthy father's livestock farms. Complementary intrigues involve Megan's mother, Sybil, a bisexual vegan feminist and animal rights advocate, and Mizz Orchid, a smart but illiterate rural worker in Brazil who refuses to eat animals because she doesn't want to harm them and who acquires political consciousness as she gets involved in a farmworkers' movement. From Florida to Massachusetts and Mississippi, and then to a large rural property in Brazil, conflicts flare between people with different life experiences as they pursue common ideals. A witty page-turner, *Humana Festa, A Novel* will interest readers of diverse backgrounds and worldviews.

Regina Rheda is the author of *First World Third Class and Other Tales of the Global Mix* (University of Texas Press). Born in Brazil, she's been living in the US since 1999. Her works of fiction have been adopted in translation and in the original Portuguese in numerous courses at American universities. Translator Charles A. Perrone is Professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature at the University of Florida.



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